Assessing English Skills: Writing

A Resource Book for Adult Basic Education

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ASSESSING ENGLISH SKILLS: WRITING

A RESOURCE BOOK FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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CONTENTS

		Page
	List of Examples and Tables	v
	The Plan of This Book	vii
	Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction:	A Perspective on Assessment	1
1.	The Assessment of Writing	5
2.	Resources Worth Knowing About	9
3.	Developing and Evaluating Writing Tasks	13
	Writing Tasks for Student Placement	13
	Writing Tasks for Instructional Planning	18
	Writing Tasks for Program Evaluation	21
	Hints for Getting a Valid Writing Sample	22
	Evaluating the Writing Sample	24
4.	Strategies for Marking	37
5.	Using Checklists to Assess and Improve the Writing Process	47
6.	Towards an External Standard: The English Placement Test	57
7.	Testing Spelling	67
8.	Helping the Better-than-Average Writer	77
9.	The Passing Problem	81
10.	Evaluate Your Writing Program	85

LIST OF EXAMPLES AND TABLES

Examples

Chapter	Example	Title	Page
3	1	Initial Writing Task — A Personal Letter	15
	2	Initial Writing Task — Response to a Cartoon	16
	3	Initial Writing Task — Response to a News Story	17
	4	Diagnostic Writing Assessment	20
	5	Analytic Scoring — General Writing Ability	26
	6	Analytic Scoring — Expository Writing	27
	7	Primary Trait Scoring Guide (Extract)	29
	8	Modified Trait Scoring — Persuasive Letter	31
5	1	Factual Writing Checklist	51
	2	Opinion Writing Checklist	52
	3	Letter Writing Checklist	53
	4	Report Writing Checklist	54
	5	Narration Checklist	55
7	1	Dictionary Test Item and Observation Guide	70
	2	How Do You Learn to Spell a New Word?	71
	3	Spelling Diagnosis	73
	4	Starter Recipe for Informal Spelling Interview	74
10	1	Writing-as-a-Process — A Reminder List	86

Tables

Chapter	Example	Title	Page
6	1	Typical EPT Scores of Five Levels of Student	59
	2	EPT Standard for Grading (ERIBC)	60

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This resource book contains a number of articles on specific aspects of writing assessment. The articles may be read singly or in sequence.

Article 1 introduces a number of key issues. Should writing be taught from a "traditional" analytic approach or from the "writing-as-a-process" perspective? Can writing ability be judged indirectly or only by actual performance? What are the options for grading or scoring compositions?

Article 2 provides information on four resources of particular relevance to writing assessment: the GED Writing Skills Test, the English Placement Test, the B.C. Assessment of Written Expression, and a Writing Evaluation Folio.

Article 3 contains suggestions for developing writing tasks and evaluating writing samples. This is followed, in Article 4, by a case study of a student essay and a discussion of six different strategies for marking it.

Article 5 takes up the practical aspects of using informal checklists to assess and improve the writing process, while Article 6 focusses on the more formal aspects of an external standard, as evidenced in the English Placement Test. Article 7 provides an excursion into the "nuts-and-bolts" area of teaching and testing spelling. Article 8 comprises some observations on ways to help the "better-than-average" student writer.

Article 9 offers some concluding observations on the problem of deciding and reporting whether a student has "passed" writing. Article 10 provides an opportunity for instructors to examine their writing program as a whole, in terms of the "writing-as-a-process" approach.

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INTRODUCTION: A PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENT

When those of us charged with compiling *Assessing English Skills* first met to discuss the project, we soon became aware that we had a multitude of complex issues to deal with. We realized, too, that organizing our material in a rigidly systematic way might prove to be a difficult task, even an impossible one. Gradually, it became clear that the plan of the book should be informal rather than formal, and the point of view more practical than theoretic.

Assessing English Skills is one of a short series of Adult Basic Education (ABE) resource books for instructors. Each is a collection of articles on what seem to be the most important aspects of a particular communication skill. The authors hope that anyone who uses the books will come away with a good overview of its subject and will pick up many useful hints for approaching the testing of English skills in a rational way.

The *Assessing English Skills* resource books were written partly in response to the request of numerous ABE instructors for some assessment guidelines. Those familiar with other Ministry publications will realize that *Assessing English Skills* relates directly to the *ABE English and Communications Curriculum Guide*. It also supports the learning materials already in the field, such as the *Communications* 3 and *VAST 4 English* workbooks and related resources.

The first two books of the *Assessing English Skills* series focus on the two aspects of the English curriculum — reading and writing — that are most frequently the subject of instruction and assessment. The most important of the authors' assumptions are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

- The twin subjects of reading and writing are more than just closely related; they are, in at least one sense, inseparable. Although a good reader may not necessarily be a good writer (possibly because of a lack of practice in the writing art), good writers must have become critical readers of at least their own writing. Teachers of writing must consequently also be teachers of reading, and the assessment of writing cannot help but involve an assessment of one's ability to read, especially of the abiltiy to read critically.

- There appears to be a realistic trend across most ABE programs towards the **informal** assessment of both reading and writing. In a survey of what is actually practised in the field, there was little evidence that classroom instructors were using standardized tests of writing. Moreover, the use of standardized reading tests does not appear to be nearly as widespread (nor in as good repute) as it was even a decade ago. The two resource books *Assessing English Skills: Writing* and *Assessing English Skills: Reading* describe various **informal** assessment approaches and offer a number of specific examples and models that could be made use of by instructors whose basic approach to assessment is informal.

- It is possible that at least one group of potential readers may find these twin books disappointing. This is the group (assuming that it really does exist) that would like to be provided with absolute and well-differentiated guidelines for the assessment of reading and writing at all the various instructional levels, and would like these standards to be set down in an authoritative way, as if from on high. Though it might be possible to do this, it would not be possible to do it honestly, since the assessment of both reading and writing, though not entirely subjective, does have strong subjective elements. For this reason, our aim has been to set down possibilities for what **might** be done, not prescriptions for what **must** be done. This does not mean that the authors hold the view that there are no standards that can guide our efforts to evaluate students. Most of us, for example, would defend the notion that *Moby Dick* is **absolutely** a better book than *Jaws*. But we do feel it is unrealistic to pretend to be absolute about standards.

- On the theme of subjectivity, something probably needs to be said about the manner in which personal idiosyncrasies, firm convictions, natural biases, and individual literary tastes can enter into, and perhaps distort, judgment in any type of assessment, particularly the assessment of someone else's writing. We do not offer any sure-fire emotional antibiotic to be universally prescribed for the cure of grossly subjective appraisals, though we can bring the dangers of this complaint to those who are in danger of being unwary victims of it. We also recognize that most institutions, English departments, and other groups of instructors would consciously avoid setting up assessment situations in which one instructor's evaluation might be set off against another's. Such situations, in the end, only confuse students and make them cynical, and they remove the likelihood that anything profitable will be taught through the assessment process.

- A curious irony dominated our experience while we were writing these resource books. Although our primary mission was to put together resources for **testing**, we found ourselves returning time and time again to matters related to **teaching**. Doubtless this came about because of a belief that in any healthy education system, instruction should always have supremacy over testing and grading. Whenever possible, testing must be at the service of teaching, and this seems of special importance when adult students are involved. Like younger students, adults do demand from time to time an answer to the question, "How am I doing?" But unless the assessment of adult students is a follow-up to appropriate and effective instruction, the testing is likely to lead to discouragement rather than inspiration. Adult students, then, are unlikely to benefit from either instruction or evaluation if they feel they are being personally intimidated or attacked. Indeed, for many adult students, especially those who suffer from hurtful memories of past failures in even the most benign forms of testing, any assessment evaluation or "quiz" is likely to pose a threat.

- The *Assessing English Skills* resource books are addressed to instructors of a particular group of adult students: those who, on the one hand, have attained the upper levels of what is generally referred to as "basic literacy," and those who have achieved something like the equivalent of high school completion. Perhaps these rough parameters can better be defined in another way. At one end of the spectrum are the students who could successfully cope with the reading and writing tasks of an ABE/BTSD Level 3 or Grade 10 preparation program; at the other end are students capable of dealing with the reading and writing requirements of first-year courses at a community college, university, or institute of technology.

- In summary, while *Assessing English Skills* will not attempt to set out a system of absolute standards for assessing reading and writing, the articles are more than a loose collection of generalizations. Whenever possible, we have tried to be specific — offering suggestions, describing marking strategies, providing factual information, and listing useful resources. We also hope that a tone of honest pragmatism has prevailed throughout these books, and that every article clearly supports the proposition that all students — and especially all adult students — have the right to be tested in a fair, judicious, and humane way.

1. THE ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

Inevitably, a number of points of view can be taken on such subjects as the teaching of writing and the testing of writing ability. For example, the difficult question of how to teach writing is approached by two schools of thought, each diametrically opposed to the other. On the one hand, there are those who think writing is most effectively taught by a process that involves the laying down of sets of well-established and well-honored principles about all relevant (and perhaps some irrelevant) aspects of grammar, rhetoric, and usage. One writer, Lawrence J. Oliver, describes this group, the "Traditionalists," in the following way:

> Students taught according to conventional methods typically are instructed to follow a step-by-step procedure for composing (organize, outline, construct and develop topic sentences, etc.), and devote far more time to studying grammar and analysing examples of good writing than to authoring their own pieces. They receive little or no advice on how to generate ideas or explore their thoughts, and they usually must proceed throughout the writing process without guidance or corrective feedback from the teacher who witholds comments and criticism until grading the final product.[1]

In contrast to the Traditionalists are those who see the teaching of writing not as the laying out of a set of rules to be obeyed but as the introduction of a process to be explored. Oliver, arguing in support of the "Writing-As-Process" approach, states that writers

> . . . do not crystallize their thoughts on a topic until struggling with them during the writing process. . . . Thus, instead of prescribing a host of "rules for good writing," process-oriented instructors emphasize to their students that there is no formula or recipe for effective writing. Though they teach their students the rules and conventions of standard or "textbook" English, they know that teaching editing is not teaching composing, and that students learn to write by writing, not by studying for and taking grammar quizzes. They therefore require their students to produce a lot of writing, and provide them with assistance and guidance at every stage of the composing process — prewriting, drafting, revising, and rewriting.[2]

If we were asked to nail our composition colors to the mast, the authors of *Assessing English Skills: Writing* would raise a banner that declared allegiance to the Writing-As-Process party. Thus the approach to assessment stressed throughout this book is allied much more with instruction that with judgments made in terms of some absolute and rule-bound standards. Although we shall examine the definition and use of an external standard of excellence, our belief is that marking should always be at the service of the writing process.

A question that must eventually be asked by anyone involved in teaching writing is, "Why must student writing be evaluated?" On one level, instructors assess student writing in order to determine competence in writing skills or to measure the progress that particular students are making in a specific writing skills program. However, on another level, instructors can have loftier goals for their evaluation activities. One rationale for evaluating student writing is that we hope to train students to become critical readers of what they themselves have written. It seems logical that by showing student writers what should have been "edited," we will help them become effective editors of their own work.

Students, however, will become critical readers only if the evluation process itself encourages the development of this skill. In order to achieve this, the evaluation process must intervene in the writing process; in other words, the evaluation must be **formative**. The trouble with many marking techniques that concentrate on dangling modifiers, mixed metaphors, and sentence fragments is that they focus on the product, not on the process. As a result, the instructor may not be assisting students to gain control over their own efforts in composition. It is our belief that such methods will have only a very limited effect on the improvement of student writing. Negative feedback has just not been shown to be helpful to a person trying to master a concept.

A second duality that must be identified briefly at this point is the difference between **direct** and **indirect** assessment.

> **Indirect assessment** involves the use of objective tests, which measure various types of language skills that are believed to be important in writing well.
>
> **Direct assessment** requires the person being tested to complete an actual writing task that is then evaluated in terms of certain preestablished criteria.

It seems logical that direct assessment is preferable to indirect, since inferring writing ability through a student's performance on English usage exercises, for example, has not generally proved to be either reliable or valid. Since writing is a process, assessment of the process is fair only when one examines the total process, not merely fragments of it in isolation.

There are several approaches to the actual scoring of student papers. Three of the most common approaches are generally known as holistic scoring, primary trait scoring, and analytic scoring. Each method has its uses, each its inherent weaknesses. (Further information on each of these scoring methods, and also on the modified trait method, is provided in Article 3.)

Holistic Scoring

This method calls for a marker to read an essay rapidly in order to gain a general overall impression and then to assign a single score. The scoring scale employed will vary, consisting in some instances of four points along a scale, in others ranging to nine or ten points. In some applications of holistic scoring, the graders are expected to match their general impression against a set of sample papers. Those who support holistic scoring believe that an essay achieves its total effect by a unique combination of its various elements. Thus, the total effect a paper creates is a better measure of its general success than is the detailed analysis of its parts. Conversely, critics of holistic scoring perceive the lack of attention to specific sub-skills of writing to be a weakness of the method, making it unsuitable also for diagnostic purposes.

Primary Trait Scoring

Primary trait scoring is based on the notion that the effectiveness of a piece of writing is related to the effectiveness of the writer in fulfilling his or her intentions in terms of an audience. The primary trait in writing a set of directions, for instance, is seen as being different from the primary trait of telling a story or writing an advertisement. The primary trait of a set of directions might be "clarity of instruction;" the primary trait of story telling might be the "effectiveness of the narrative flow." And so on. In this type of grading, other factors (such as elegance of expression) do not enter into the evaluation; it is the presence or absence of the primary trait that becomes the basis for evaluation. The trait is either there or not there.

However, primary trait scoring does recognize that any piece of writing may be characterised in several ways; therefore, secondary traits can be identified and can enter into the evaluation. Involving many secondary traits, however, complicates and slows down the grading process, so the checklist of traits being evaluated has to be kept manageable. The obvious criticism levelled against primary trait scoring is that it fails to take into account the overall effectiveness (or lack of effectivenss) of the particular piece of writing.

Analytic Scoring

In this system, a checklist of qualities is established, and each aspect of the writing included on the list is assigned a weighting factor. The weighting may be equal for every item, or some items may be considered as being more important than others.

The items to be evaluated may be few in number, or there may be as many as twenty. The checklists themselves can show a wide range of difference in the items they set out to evaluate. Though it may be more time consuming than either holistic or primary trait scoring, analytic scoring has a strong potential for providing students with detailed information about their writing.

References

[1] Lawrence J. Oliver, "Helping Students Overcome Writer's Block," *Journal of Reading*, 26 (November 1982), p. 163.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 164.

2. RESOURCES WORTH KNOWING ABOUT

Five instructional resources that touch either directly or indirectly on the teaching of writing in Adult Basic Education are described briefly in this article along with references to further information about them. The five items discussed are *The General Educational Development Tests* (the GED), *The English Placement Test* (the EPT), *The Report on British Columbia Assessment of Written Expression, 1978*, the *Writing Evaluation Folio*, and the *English 12 Writing Achievement Test*.

General Educational Development Test

There are five tests, one each in writing, reading, social studies, science, and mathematics. Adults who pass the tests in all five subjects receive a British Columbia Secondary School Equivalency Certificate. The five tests are "designed to measure as directly as possible the major generalizations, ideas, and intellectual skills normally gained through 12 years of formal education."

Although the word "directly" is employed in the tests' statement of intent, the assessment of both reading and writing is entirely indirect, no composition being required. The Writing Skills test assures the student that it is "intended to measure your ability to use clear and effective English." But what it does measure, in fact, is the student's ability to **recognize**, rather than use, "clear and effective English." All questions on the test are of the multiple choice variety: none of the questions requires the examinee to employ English in a direct way.

The GED test of writing consists of eighty multiple-choice items selected from five categories — spelling, punctuation and capitalization, grammar and usage, sentence structure, and paragraph organization. Students are given seventy-five minutes to work through the test. Practice tests containing typical items are available from a commercial publisher (see "Resources" at the end of this article).

The tests may be written at various times throughout the year at testing centres usually located in community colleges. Tests may be taken by British Columbia residents over nineteen years of age who have been out of school for at least one academic year and who have not received a Grade 12 certificate from any institution. For further information, contact the GED Examiner in the Ministry of Education or in one of the colleges (see below).

The English Placement Test

The English Placement Test has been administered in British Columbia since 1977. Funded by the Ministry of Education and managed by the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia, the test has been taken by upwards of 20,000 students each year. In the majority of the province's post-secondary institutions, students must submit their scores on the test before being registered in a first-year English class. Until 1983 no fee was charged to the examinees, and in most parts of the province there were at least three opportunities for writing the test — in March, July, and November. Plans are at present underway to change the funding arrangements of the EPT. It is likely that in the future there will be a user fee of between fifteen and twenty dollars per test. It seems likely that prior to registration many post-secondary institutions will require first-year English students to show evidence that they have written the EPT.

The English Placement Test has two items, one an indirect assessment, the other direct. The first item consists of forty sentences, the majority of which contain one error in English usage that the examinee must identify but not correct. This part of the test aims to identify those students who, for whatever reasons, reveal a basic unfamiliarity with the English language. The second item requires an expository essay of between 300 and 500 words on one of several suggested topics.

The objective section of the test is machine scored, while the subjective question is marked on a holistic basis by teams of markers. By most accounts, the test developers have been successful in evolving an essay-grading system that has a relatively high degree of validity.

During the EPT marking sessions, each marker assigns three grades (each out of ten) to each paper. One mark is for "Content and Development," one for "Sentence Structure," and one for "Use of Words." Markers are required to evaluate these three aspects of the writings independently and are urged not to assign an across-the-board evaluation. Markers are urged to think of each mark they assign as a "message" to individual students, a means of signalling to them their strengths and/or weaknesses in prose composition.

Each EPT essay is graded twice. The first markers seal off their evaluations, and the second markers are required to make independent evaluations without knowing the first scores. The two sets of marks are then compared by the head markers and the paper is given a third reading if any serious discrepancy exists.

Further information about the EPT may be obtained from the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia (see below).

British Columbia Assessment of Written Expression, 1978

The *General Report* on this province-wide assessment is a document of nearly 400 pages, which describes in considerable detail a series of writing tests carried out in British Columbia schools in Grades 4, 8, and 12 during 1978. Although the report contains too much information for easy summary here, it is recommended to anyone interested in reviewing a broadly based and carefully executed study of student achievement. The results of the assessment indicate, perhaps to nobody's surprise, that students at all levels don't write as well as it was hoped and expected they would.

Of potential interest to the Adult Basic Education instructor are two aspects of the report. One is the list of forty-three specific skills that the study tested; another the compilation of twenty-eight recommendations for the improvement of composition teaching. ABE teachers may find useful hints or suggestions within both of these lists. They may also pick up an idea or two from the interesting variety of writing tasks that the examiners thought up for their assessment purposes.

A short *Summary Report* of the assessment is also available, though for the front-line instructor the longer report contains more usable material. Further information may be obtained from the Learning Assessment Branch of the Ministry of Education (see below).

Writing Evaluation Folio

The *Writing Evaluation Folio* was a later outcome of the 1978 survey on writing assessment described above. The folio consists of four parts — a User's Manual, plus three folders of writing assignments, related to topics in English, Social Studies, and Science. Although the material in these kits is designed for students at the Grade 10 level, ABE instructors will find here many useful ideas for writing assignments along with some quite specific guides for marking them. The folio is based on the premise that students will improve their skills in writing if instructors in all subject areas share the responsibility of providing writing instruction.

In the English folder are assignments on giving directions, describing objects and people, and writing a business letter, a report, or an informal essay. The Science folder also focuses on some of these types of writing as well as on summaries and lab reports. The Social Studies folder features tasks in note taking, summarizing, describing, and reporting. All three folders describe imaginative writing situations, many enhanced by drawings that could motivate both thinking and writing. All assignments are accompanied by practical, detailed guides for instructors to use in marking.

English 12 Writing Achievement Test

This test, developed for schools by the Ministry in co-operation with the B.C. English Teachers' Association, comes in two forms. Part I of each test contains exercises on generating ideas, sentence combining, and mechanics; Part II contains exercises on correcting errors and composing an effective letter. A teacher's manual provides directions for administering, marking, and interpreting the results of the test.

Resources

GED Testing Program: Information Booklet. Obtainable free on request from GED Examiner, Ministry of Education, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B.C. V8V 2M4.

GED Practice Tests (Canadian Edition). May be purchased from Allyn and Bacon, 791 St. Clair Avenue West, Toronto, Ontario M6C 1B8.

English Placement Test. Information available from Education Research Institute of B.C., Suite 701, 601 West Broadway, Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 4C2.

B.C. Assessment of Written Expression 1978. Obtainable free on request from Learning Assessment Branch, Ministry of Education, 7451 Elmbridge Way, Richmond, B.C. V6X 1B8.

Writing Evaluation Folio. Available for a fee of $10.00 from Learning Assessment Branch, Ministry of Education, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B.C. V8V 2M4.

English 12 Writing Achievement Test. Limited numbers of copies available free on request from Learning Assessment Branch, Ministry of Education, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B.C. V8V 2M4.

3. DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING WRITING TASKS

The only valid way to assess how well a student can write is through the direct assessment approach; that is, by having students actually write.

Direct writing assessment requires the instructor to locate or develop a task that will generate a sample of writing, and then to evaluate the writing according to some set of criteria.

Educational purposes for administering a direct writing assessment commonly include student placement, instructional planning, and program evaluation.

This article contains suggestions for developing writing tasks and evaluating writing samples. Examples of writing topics and sample scoring sheets adaptable for local use have been included.

WRITING TASKS FOR STUDENT PLACEMENT

A writing sample is often used to determine entry level for a particular student. An initial writing sample might be obtained at an assessment or counselling session prior to the student's entering an ABE program, or in class during the first days of instruction. This initial assessment is intended for use as a rough guide of student writing ability in order to help direct the student into an appropriate program. The initial assessment can be followed later by a detailed diagnosis of individual strengths and weaknesses.

Because the initial assessment is intended to measure general writing ability, not specific writing skills, topic selection can be very informal. In fact, the more informal the topics, the better. Many students entering ABE classrooms carry with them bitter memories of failure in earlier writing activities. The more students feel secure that they are writing about something familiar, the less intimidating the experience will be. The less structured the topic, and the more "open" the possibilities are for individual interpretation, the less likely it is that students will feel that there is a "right" or "wrong" way to answer.

Many instructors find that students are most comfortable writing about themselves. Students can be asked to write an informal letter to the instructor about themselves (see Example 1 below). In this case the instructor gains not only some diagnostic information but also an insight into the particular needs of the individual student.

Almost any topic can be used as a writing stimulus in an initial writing assessment. The key is interest and accessibility for the student. A picture or cartoon about a topic that adults can relate to, and about which everyone has some familiarity, is a good choice for a writing stimulus (see Example 2 below). The topic should be one almost any adult can relate to. A picture or cartoon encourages a variety of interpretations, none of which is "right" or "wrong." Instructions should stress the importance of the writer's personal interpretation: "Tell how the problem affects you" rather than "demonstrate an understanding of this issue."

Similarly, a headline or brief cutting from the newspaper about a current, well-publicized topic is another possiblity for use as a writing stimulus (see Example 3 below). Again, personal response is stressed: "Give your own ideas about what should be done."

Since the purpose of the initial assessment is to generate a representative sample of general writing ability, interest in the topic is an important consideration. Therefore, the student should be given as much choice and flexibility as possible in topic selection. In an autobiographical writing sample, the instructions should give enough scope for the writer to decide what is relevant (see Example 1). In an opinion writing sample, several equivalent topics for opinion writing should be provided. A news clipping (as in Example 3) should state the main idea of the story.

EXAMPLE 1: INITIAL WRITING TASK — A PERSONAL LETTER

The purpose of asking you to write this brief letter is to give you a chance to do some writing. This will help us place you in the right English course.

Here is what to do:

1. Write a letter of about fifteen lines telling us anything about yourself that you think it would be useful for us to know.
2. You can write about any aspect of your own life that you care to write about. Here are a number of suggestions from which you can choose:
   - the school (or schools) you have attended so far;
   - various jobs you have worked at;
   - places you have travelled to or visited;
   - where you are living now;
   - special interests or hobbies that you have;
   - the way you feel about returning to school;
   - your attitude to reading and writing;
   - your family and friends;
   - how you would like to spend the rest of your life.
3. Remember, you don't have to try to cover all of the above matters in your letter. These are just some suggestions that may help you decide what you want to say. You are also free to write about things not mentioned on the list.
4. Give your paragraph a title. Check it for good spelling and punctuation. Hand it to your instructor. MAKE SURE YOUR NAME IS AT THE TOP OF THE PAPER. Return this question sheet.

EXAMPLE 2: INITIAL WRITING TASK — RESPONSE TO A CARTOON

The idea of this item is to give you a chance to do some writing. This will help us place you in the right English course.

Here is a cartoon from a newspaper. Here is what to do with it:

1. In a few sentences, explain the idea of the cartoon.
2. The cartoon is about a problem that many people in Canada have today. Write about ten to fifteen lines (or as much as you can) about this problem. Tell how it affects **you**.
3. Give your paragraph a title. Check it for good spelling and punctuation. Hand it to the instructor. MAKE SURE YOUR NAME IS AT THE TOP OF THE PAPER. Return this question sheet.

Instructor: insert a topical cartoon here — one with universal adult interest, few words, and clear inference, and one that would be easy to write about.

EXAMPLE 3: INITIAL WRITING TASK — RESPONSE TO A NEWS STORY

The idea of this item is to give you a chance to do some writing. This will help us place you in the right English course.

Here is part of an article from a newspaper. This is what do with it:

1. In a few sentences, explain the idea of the story.
2. The story is about a problem that many people are concerned about. Write about ten to fifteen lines (or as much as you can) about this problem. Give your own ideas about what should be done.
3. Give your paragraph a title. Check it for good spelling and punctuation. Hand it to the instructor. MAKE SURE YOUR NAME IS AT THE TOP OF THE PAPER. Return this question sheet.

Instructor: insert a topical news story here — one about a "problem" most adults would be concerned about and that would be easy to read and write about, containing all essentials of the story.

WRITING TASKS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING

Writing samples can be used at any time in a course to measure precisely defined writing skills. Writing strengths and weaknesses can be diagnosed, and individualized writing activities prescribed, based on the needs of the student.

Instructional planning has a much more narrowly defined purpose than student placement. In the initial assessment, the goal is simply to get a writing sample that represents general writing ability. Choices about the writing situation (topic, purpose, audience, format) are made solely on the basis of interest and practicality for the student.

In a diagnostic writing assessment, the goal is to measure skills in a specific writing situation. For example, an instructor might wish to measure a student's competence in writing a persuasive business letter. The writing-task instructions would direct the student to display knowledge of the specific skills necessary for successful persuasive business letter writing. The writing situation (topic, purpose, audience, format) would be explicitly defined.

The initial assessment topic "Raising the Driving Age," for instance, could function as a diagnostic testing instrument, if (as in the following example) the instructions specified a well-defined writing situation.

> Write a letter to the Minister of Highways, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B.C. clearly stating your opinions and your reasons for your opinion. Your opinion may be based on your own experience, the experience of someone you know about, or on logic. Tell what you think should be done about the problem.
>
> Use a business-letter format. Take your time planning your letter. Hand your letter in to the instructor when you are satisfied with it.

Competence in significant writing skills may be assessed on a unit by unit basis. In a pre-test, the writing sample provides information to help the instructor decide which skills in a particular instructional unit should be stressed. In a post-test situation, a writing sample clearly indicates whether specific skills have been learned.

Diagnostic assessments can also be used to determine a student's progress in significant skills taught in a particular writing program by means of mid- and end-course writing assessments.

In order to get valid writing samples for instructional planning purposes, it is first necessary to identify the significant skills and essential sub-skills that were taught in a unit of instruction. Then writing tasks that will demonstrate competence in these skills can be developed.

The most significant skills in a unit of instruction are the skills that are most generalizable. A generalizable writing skill is one that subsumes essential writing sub-skills. Success in the significant writing skill, then, indicates success in its component sub-skills.

For example, persuasive business-letter writing is a highly significant (i.e., generalizable) skill. Success in this activity implies competence in essential sub-skills such as the ability to develop an argument, organize a paragraph, and employ business-letter format.

Once the most significant skills taught in a unit of instruction have been identified, valid writing tasks that will measure competence in them can be developed. Writing-task instructions should direct the student to display knowledge of the essential sub-skills involved in the writing activity. The writing situation (purpose, topic, audience, format) should be clearly defined. The following stimulus could be used to generate a representative sample of descriptive writing ability.

EXAMPLE 4:
DIAGNOSTIC WRITING ASSESSMENT

Write a Description

The driver of the vehicle pictured below slammed into the side of a car in a parking lot and drove away. You will use this picture to write an eye-witness description of the "hit and run" vehicle, as the first paragraph of an accident report.

Instructor: insert suitable photo or illustration of any car.

1. Write a concise description of the vehicle in the picture. Use **specific details** to help police identify the vehicle. Use a logical **ordering system** to help your reader follow your description.

   Make up **specific** details to identify the vehicle that the black and white picture doesn't show.

   Your description should be about five to seven sentences (one paragraph).

2. **Check** your description. Take your time writing your good copy. **Double space.**

3. **Hand in** your description when you are satisfied with it.

WRITING TASKS FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

Another purpose for administering a direct writing assessment is to determine the effectiveness of a writing program. The information gained from writing samples can be used in the following types of evaluations.

Formative Program Evaluation: Significant components of a writing program are assessed periodically. Revisions of the program are made on the basis of these assessments.

Summative Program Evaluation: The effectiveness of a writing program as a whole is assessed to determine whether the course should be continued or terminated.

Steps in the procedure for getting valid writing samples for program evaluation purposes are the same as those involved in diagnostic testing for instructional planning. They are as follows.

Identification of significant writing skills and their essential sub-skills as taught in a writing program;

Development of writing tasks which will demonstrate competence in these skills.

For example, if persuasive business-letter writing were determined to include critical skills taught in a course (essential organizing paragraphs, pattern development, business-letter format), then this would be a valid writing activity.

Testing intervals will vary, depending on whether formative or summative decisions are being made. Formative program evaluation may take the form of comparative pre- and post-unit tests. However, more frequently, students are tested at the middle and end of a course. Testing before instruction serves as a basis for comparison. Formative evaluation may involve repeated testings, especially if revisions are being made. Summative program evaluation most often takes the form of comparative pre- and post-course testing.

For instructors or departments interested in another approach to program evaluation, Article 10 of this book presents a brief array of questions to stimulate a new look at an overall program of writing instruction.

HINTS FOR GETTING A VALID WRITING SAMPLE

Establish Purpose for Testing

The validity of a test always depends on how well the test items fit the intended purpose for that test. For example, an initial writing sample is valid only as a broad screening device. It should not be used to assess specific skills for instructional planning.

Similarly, in diagnostic assessment, a sample of narrative writing is valid only as a measure of skill in narrative writing. Results on a narrative task, for instance, should probably not be used to infer a writer's competence to handle description or exposition.

Give Adequate Time

In order to ensure that a representative (valid) writing sample is obtained, make sure the student has enough time to complete the writing task comfortably. Give enough time for revision and rewriting. It's best if writing time is open-ended: "Hand in your work when you are satisfied with it."

Select Writing Stimulus at Appropriate Reading Level

A valid test will test only what it is supposed to be testing. A writing assessment should test writing, not reading. Therefore, the readability of the writing stimulus should be carefully screened. For example, if a clipping from a newspaper article is used, readability of that clipping should be within the range of the students.

Provide Topic Choice

If a student is obliged to write on an uninteresting or unfamiliar topic, the resulting writing sample may not be a valid example of writing ability. Interest and familiarity are factors that affect both the quantity and quality of writing produced. Choice between equivalent topics gives a student the opportunity to produce a writing sample representative of true writing ability (i.e., a valid writing sample). Evaluation of valid writing samples produces reliable (consistent) scores.

Get Enough Samples of Student Writing

In order to get a valid sample of the skill the test is intended to cover, and to arrive at reliable scores, it is desirable to obtain several samples of student writing. An ideal approach would be to take two or three writing samples per student at each testing, preferably on different days. Wording of the instructions should remain consistent, since changes in wording could result in changes in students' writing.

Representative sampling of student writing is particularly important if the test is being used for diagnostic purposes. However, even if the test is being used for initial placement, a follow-up writing sample should be taken in the first week of instruction. Scores of the two samples should be compared.

EVALUATING THE WRITING SAMPLE

The best way to score a writing sample will largely depend on the purpose of assessment. What information is required? How easy is the scoring system to implement?

Several common scoring methods are now discussed, with particular reference to the purpose and practicality of each. The methods described are those of holistic scoring, analytic scoring, primary trait scoring, and the modified trait method.

Holistic Scoring

Holistic scoring is the most common method for evaluating student writing. In holistic scoring a writing sample is examined as an organic whole. Specific features of writing skills are not considered independently. Instead, markers read for overall impression — a quick "gut level" response to a paper.

Purposes: Holistic scoring is used to differentiate the writing ability of a group of students. This scoring method is most often used for student placement.

Method: Using a numerical scale, a set of student papers is sorted and assigned to different points along the scale. To determine "anchor points" for the scale, a sample of papers may be scored first.

A holistic rating scale may have from four to ten points. An even number of points on the scale eliminates the temptation to score on the mid-point. "In-between" scores are not usually permitted.

Scoring Criteria: In holistic scoring, papers are rated in relation to one another. Therefore, papers receiving the highest scores may not be "good" papers as defined by an external standard, but merely the best papers of a particular group.

However, in formal initial testing situations such as the English Placement Test, external criteria for the numerical points may be defined. This ensures consistent scores among markers, especially when markers from various backgrounds are evaluating a single set of writing samples. (See also Article 7 on the EPT scoring system.)

Advantages and Disadvantages: Holistic scoring is a quick, reliable method for comparing a group of writing samples. Of the scoring systems being discussed here, it is by far the easiest to use. Holistic scoring is well-suited for discriminating between papers in an initial screening. It is also equally applicable to different types of writing (e.g., expository, creative, prose, poetry). The main disadvantage of holistic scoring is that it provides no diagnostic information about individual papers. Holistic scoring is a reliable method to determine that one paper is better than another, but it may indicate little more than that.

Analytic Scoring

Analytic scoring evaluates the significant features of a piece of writing. Each paper is judged independently, according to established criteria for the scored features. Some analytic score sheets assess the writing skills that are considered essential for any piece of writing (see Example 5). Other scoring guides may be designed for one particular rhetorical mode such as narration or exposition (see Example 6). Well-constructed analytic scoring guides help the instructor make valuable diagnostic judgments about individual writing strengths and weaknesses.

Purposes: This scoring method can be used at the instructional planning stage to obtain information about specific writing instruction needed by a student or group. It may also be used in program evaluation to assess how well the significant writing skills have been learned as the consequence of a particular program of instruction.

Method: Significant features of writing ability are first identified. The features are then rated using a numerical scale commonly organized into such categories as "high," "middle," and "low." Although features are rated independently, they may be tallied to give an overall rating. The numerical scores may also be weighted to increase or decrease the relative importance of each feature.

Scoring Criteria: In formal testing situations, scoring sheets generally include definitions of criteria for each feature scored. Thus, Example 7 also provides definitions for the feature of "organization." Such definitions make for greater reliability of scoring when a paper is to be scored by more than one marker. Individual instructors may find them unnecessary.

Advantages and Disadvantages: Analytic scoring is probably the best scoring method to use if diagnostic information about specific writing skills is required. It also provides a valid measure of general writing ability, provided that enough significant traits are scored. The method is highly reliable, especially when accompanied by criteria definitions. The scoring method can be adapted in several ways for classroom use by students, student editors, and instructors.

The major disadvantage is that it takes longer to score a paper analytically than holistically; however, this disadvantage may be outweighed by the greater detail of information obtained. Analytic scoring guides for specific rhetorical modes take time to develop. Again, this time cost should be compared to the benefit potentially obtainable.

EXAMPLE 5: ANALYTIC SCORING
GENERAL WRITING ABILITY

Directions: Check the appropriate score.

5 - Excellent
4 - Very Good
3 - Good
2 - Weak
1 - Poor
N - Not applicable

	High		Middle		Low		Overall Evaluation
	5	4	3	2	1	N	
1. **Thesis or Central Idea**							
- Indicates purpose.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Has point of view.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Is limited enough.	—	—	—	—	—	—	———
2. **Organization**							
- One idea logically follows another.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Transitions are used.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Intro, body, and conclusion are well proportioned.	—	—	—	—	—	—	———
3. **Development**							
- Important points are clearly emphasized.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Opinions are backed up by facts, quotations, details, etc.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Originality.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Intro makes you want to read on.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Body shows insight into the topic.	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Conclusion summarizes without being repetitious.	—	—	—	—	—	—	———
4. **Mechanics**							
- Punctuation	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Sentence Clarity	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Sentence Variety	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Word Usage	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Grammar	—	—	—	—	—	—	
- Spelling	—	—	—	—	—	—	———
5. **Other Comments**							

EXAMPLE 6: ANALYTIC SCORING EXPOSITORY WRITING

Topic _____ Reader _____ Paper _____

	Low		Middle		High
Ideas	2	4	6	8	10
Organization	2	4	6	8	10
Wording	1	2	3	4	5
Tone	1	2	3	4	5
Usage	1	2	3	4	5
Punctuation	1	2	3	4	5
Spelling	1	2	3	4	5
Handwriting	1	2	3	4	5

Content Total_____ Form Total_____ TOTAL_____

Scoring Guidelines for "Organization" Trait

High: The paper starts at a good point, has a sense of movement, gets somewhere, and then stops. The paper has an underlying plan that the reader can follow; one is never in doubt as to where one is or where one is going. Sometimes there is a little twist near the end that makes the paper come out in a way that the reader does not expect, but it seems quite logical. Main points are treated at greatest length or with greatest emphasis, others in proportion to their importance.

Middle: The organization of this paper is standard and conventional. There is usually a one-paragraph introduction, main points each treated in one paragraph, and a conclusion that often seems tacked on or forced. Some trivial points are treated in greater detail than important points, and there is usually some dead wood that might better be cut out.

Low: The paper starts anywhere and never gets anywhere. The main points are not clearly separated from one another, and they come in a random order as though the student had not given any thought to the subject before starting to write. The paper seems to start in one direction, then another, then another, until the reader is lost.

Primary Trait Scoring

A primary trait is a characteristic considered essential to the effectiveness of a specific piece of writing. For example, if the task is to write an accident report, the arrangement of events in logical sequence would be a primary trait. Effective accident reports would have that trait; ineffective reports, no matter how well written in other respects, would not display that trait.

Primary trait scoring is based on the idea that all writing must have a purpose and an audience. Successful writing will have a certain desired effect on a particular audience. In contrast to analytic scoring, which measures very general characteristics of writing ability (see Example 6), primary trait scoring focuses attention on those characteristics that are specific to a particular writing task. Thus, for the task of writing a persuasive letter (for example, to a business or to a newspaper) a critical primary trait might be "purpose or opinion clearly stated."

Purposes: Primary trait scoring is useful for obtaining diagnostic information about specific writing skills. This information may be used for instructional planning, and in some cases for program evaluation.

Scoring Criteria: Competence in the primary trait is commonly measured on a 1-to-4 scale.

1. absence of trait
2. presence of trait
3. adequate expression of trait
4. excellent expression of trait

Each point on the scale may then be given an expanded definition related to the specific writing task. Finally, examples from representative papers may be used to clarify or "anchor" the scale.

Advantages and Disadvantages: The precision of primary trait scoring is its greatest advantage, against which must be weighed the time required to clearly define criterion levels of success.

In a strict application of this method, only a limited number of traits would be measured for each piece of writing. Competence in a trait such as "development of an argument" would also **imply** competence in sub-traits such as paragraph organization and word choice, though these would not be measured separately. Example 7, an extract from a primary trait scoring guide, illustrates both its desirable precision and less desirable complexity.

Fortunately, the best features of primary trait scoring may be combined with some concepts from the analytic approach to provide a "Modified Trait Method," which is explained and illustrated in the final part of this article.

EXAMPLE 7: PRIMARY TRAIT SCORING GUIDE (EXTRACT)

Primary Trait Tested — Development of an Argument: The ability to state an opinion and to develop support for that opinion in order to convince a specific reader of the appeal of the argument presented.

Rating Scale: 1 (low) to 4 (high). Minimum competency 3.

Description of Criteria for a "2" Rating: A position is identified but support is inadequately developed. In a letter of this type, a position is taken and reason(s) given in support. Reason(s) and/or suggestions are on-topic but support is inadequate because of the lack of development in the reasons or suggestions. The reason(s) are markedly overgeneralized.

If **one** reason is given, there is an absence of qualifying words (usually, often, etc.), or a lack of sufficient examples to support the reason, therefore making it unconvincing. Note the following example.

> *I do agree that the driving age should be raised from sixteen to eighteen. The reason I think this, is that when your sixteen you just start partying and your just learning to handle different things. When you are eighteen you can handle yourself better and you also know what responsibilities are. Thank you for reading my letter.*

When **more** than one reason is given, there is a predominantly overgeneralized approach so that, rather than supporting the opinion, the reasons appear illogical. Thus, the writer has failed to achieve proper emphasis by qualifying ideas.

There may be little or no use of transition words or of organizing patterns to produce logical connections between ideas, so that the ideas appear only haphazardly connected. In other words, such a letter often lacks coherence.

> *I would like to give my opinion about the recent controversy in British Columbia about raising the driving age from 16 to 18. I believe there is no reason for this change, why should it be changed? This province may think young juveniles are not reasponsible enough to be behind the wheel, but nobody really is. More and more people 16 and up are becoming self supporting. They need transportation or how else are they going to get to work? Its hard enough for them to survive in this province.*

Modified Trait Method

The four steps to using this quite practical scoring method are described below (and are illustrated by Example 8, which follows). The method and rating scales may be easily adapted for use with any assigned writing task. A further simplification of the method is developed in Article 5: "Using Checklists to Improve the Writing Process."

First, the primary traits **and** essential sub-traits of a piece of writing are identified. Thus, in Example 8, the primary traits scored are "A: Development of Argument," and "B: Business-Letter Principles."

The sub-traits of A are Main Idea, Explanation, and Conclusion. The sub-traits of B are Tone, Sentence Structure, Spelling, and Format.

Secondly, each sub-trait is described in terms of a 1-to-4 rating scale. The scale ranges from 1 (absence of trait), through 2 (presence of trait) and 3 (adequate expression of trait) up to 4 (excellent expression of trait). The descriptions of the scale points may include short examples from representative or "anchor" papers, but this is not always necessary.

Thirdly, student papers are scored according to the rating system, which is also relatively easy to explain to student writers. Sub-trait scores may be totalled, but there is no particular merit to this procedure as details and specifics are inevitably lost within any type of composite score.

Finally, a "minimum competency" may be set for each trait or sub-trait (in this example, a rating of 3 on each scale).

EXAMPLE 8: MODIFIED TRAIT SCORING PERSUASIVE LETTER

Primary Trait A — Development of Argument: The ability to state an opinion and develop support for that opinion in order to convince a specific reader of the appeal of the argument presented.

Sub-traits: main idea, explanation, conclusion.

Primary Trait B — Business-Letter Principles: The ability to use accepted business-letter principles.

Sub-traits: tone, sentence structure, spelling, format.

Description of Rating Scales: A 1-to-4 rating scale is described for each sub-trait. The minimum competency level in each case is 3.

A. Development of Argument

Main Idea

1. Purpose/opinion is not stated (e.g., writer jumps right into reasons; purpose/opinion is stated but is unclear to reader).
2. Purpose/opinion is stated, but not at beginning of letter.
3. Purpose/opinion is clearly stated at beginning of letter (e.g., "I am writing to give my opinion on raising the driving age from 16 to 18.")
4. Purpose/opinion is clearly stated at beginning of letter and motivates reader to continue (e.g., "I am writing in response to the controversy on raising the driving age from 16 to 18. I feel the driving age should be raised for the following reasons:").

Explanation

1. No reasons or suggestions given; reasons given are clearly off-topic.
2. Reasons and suggestions are on-topic but are inadequately developed to support position.
3. Reasons and suggestions are on-topic and are adequately developed to support position.
4. Reasons and suggestions are on-topic and are excellently developed to support opinion.

Conclusion

1. There are no concluding comments. Letter ends abruptly and/or conclusion does not follow from facts given.
2. Concluding comments are made, but no call for action is stated or implied (e.g., "Thank you for reading my letter.").
3. Concluding comments are made; a call for action is stated or clearly implied (e.g., "Thank you for reading my letter. I hope you will take my comments into consideration when making your decision.").
4. Concluding comments are made; a call for action is stated or clearly implied. Concluding comments reflect emphasis of arguments (e.g., "Therefore, for the above reasons, I feel that the best solution to the problem is . . . .").

B. Business-Letter Principles

Tone

1. Tone is completely unacceptable for business letter.
2. Some attempt at appropriate tone, but major lapses occur.
3. Adequate expression of business-letter tone. No obviously rude remarks.
4. Excellent expression of business-letter tone. Appropriately courteous tone throughout.

Sentence Structure

The basis of this scale is the frequency and severity of errors. However, length of composition must also be considered.

Major errors: run-on sentences, fragments, ineffective subordination, subject-verb disagreement, end punctuation.

1. Requires significant effort by reader. Several types of major errors repeated frequently, along with several minor errors. Little sentence control. Comprehension difficult because of number of errors.
2. Structure does not hamper comprehension despite several types of major errors **or** one major error repeated. May contain frequent run-ons and subordination problems.
3. Few major errors **or** several minor errors. Comprehension not affected.
4. No major errors. Few minor errors. Comprehension not affected.

Spelling

Count each error **once** only.

1. Extreme spelling difficulty.
2. Many errors.
3. A few errors.
4. No errors.

Format

(Your Address)

(Date)

(Reader's Name)
(Reader's Address)

Dear _____ :

(Body or Message)

Yours _____ ,

(Signature)
(Your Name, Typed
or Printed)

1. Writer either does not use business-letter format, or makes so many errors that it would be completely unacceptable if sent as a business letter.

2. Writer attempts to use business-letter format, but makes significant errors (e.g., does not paragraph, leaves out interior address).

3. Writer uses business-letter format, makes only minor errors (e.g., forgets comma after "Yours truly," uses commas instead of colon in salutation, forgets date.)

4. Writer uses business-letter format, makes no errors or only one or two minor errors.

Resources

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Powell, David. *What Can I Write About? 7 000 Topics for High School Students.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

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4. STRATEGIES FOR MARKING

"Team Sports," the sample of student writing reproduced below, can help us discuss in fairly specific terms some different approaches that may be taken by an instructor when marking and grading essays.

TEAM SPORTS

To get the enjoyment out of sports, I prefer to play a team sport rather than playing an individual sport. Individual sports, sort of has a bond over you, where you have to do good, and have to be better than the other guy.

Team sports has many options for a person to fit in. He may be lacking in his ability to score, but his defensive play makes up for it.

If your lacking confidince in team sports you have the support of the rest of the team to build it up. All this support could be called team spirit. Team spirit is very important on the outcome of the teams future.

If the sport you are playing is set in your eyes for your future profession, there are many alleys to persue in team sports. There are always people from top organizations scouting you as you climb up the ladder of competition. Its your choice to move up and make your dream a reality.

You always here the phrase, "more the merryier," this quote can be applied to team sport. In practice sessions or road trips, there are always people present to joke with or give each other tips.

The different approaches or "strategies" that an instructor may take in marking and grading such an essay are not all equally useful, as the following examination will show. First, however, a distinction should be made between the terms "grading" and "marking." In general usage, these terms tend to be used interchangeably, but a useful and significant distinction between the two does exist. **Grading** is the easier of the two activities. The instructor reads through a composition and puts some kind of an holistic evaluation on it — a numerical grade, a letter grade, or perhaps some honorific or pejorative term, such as "outstanding," "good," "average," or "unsatisfactory." Grading is what is done by those who evaluate provincial exams or the English Placement Test, as well as by classroom instructors faced with subjective answers to final exam questions. **Marking** takes more time and energy since it requires the instructor to make specific comments on various parts of the composition, write a general comment, and make an evaluation. Grading does not include marking, though marking does include grading.

Now to the strategies, **six** in all. They are listed in ascending order of their usefulness; that is, with the least useful one given first. All refer to the sample student essay on Team Sports.

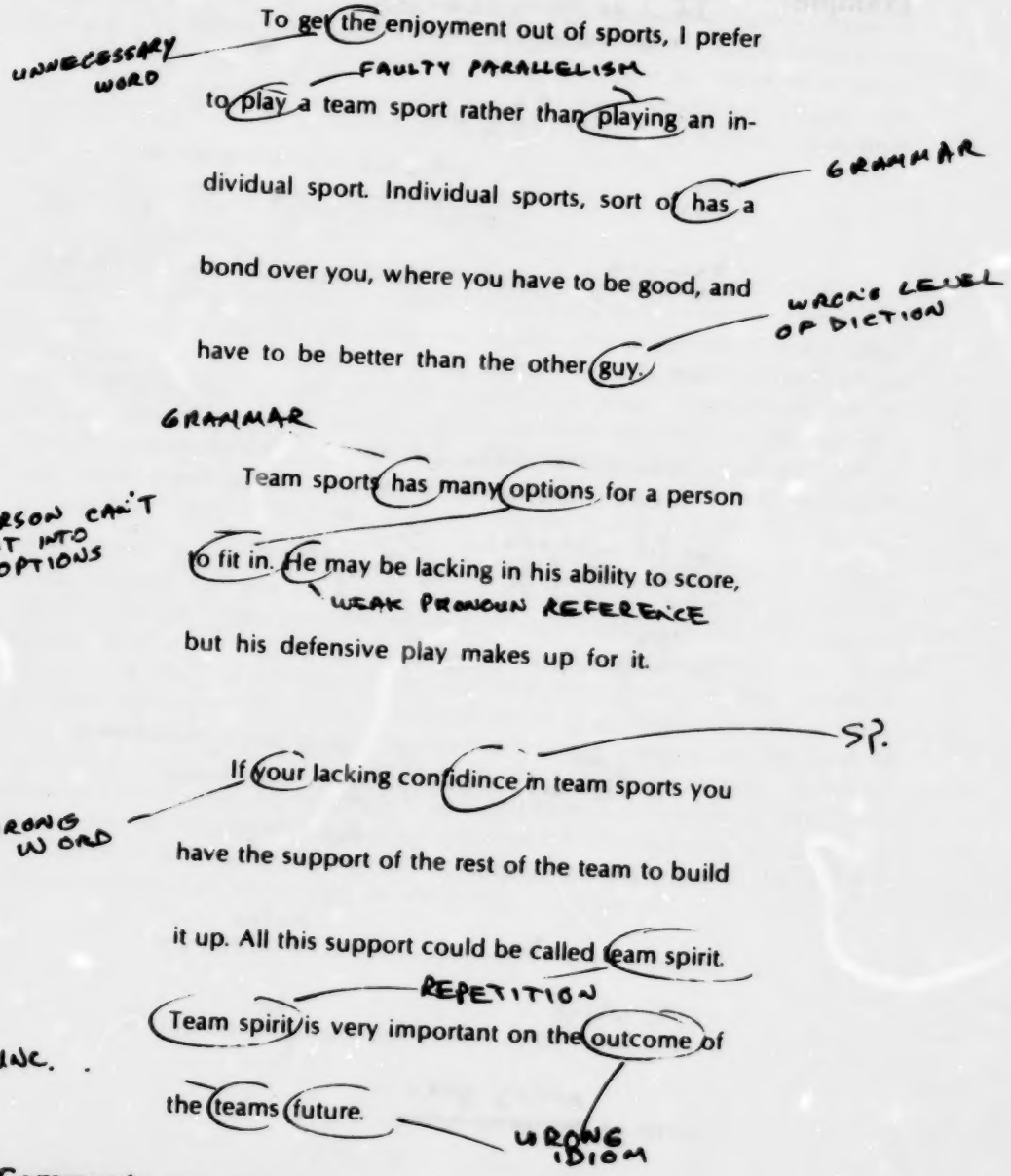
Strategy One: Giving a General Comment and Grade Only

Example: "This is not a satisfactory piece of composition because there are just too many places where your writing is ungrammatical, your word choice is bad, and your spelling is atrocious. Grade: F."

Comment: Although the above comments are all justified, they are not really that much help to the student. Neither the tone of the comment, nor the F grade that accompanies it, is likely to motivate the student to want to write better.

Strategy Two: Identifying the Errors

Example:



To get the enjoyment out of sports, I prefer to play a team sport rather than playing an individual sport. Individual sports, sort of has a bond over you, where you have to be good, and have to be better than the other guy.

Team sports has many options for a person to fit in. He may be lacking in his ability to score, but his defensive play makes up for it.

If your lacking confidince in team sports you have the support of the rest of the team to build it up. All this support could be called team spirit. Team spirit is very important on the outcome of the teams future.

Comment: This kind of marking is, again, relatively quick and easy. However, even if the student understands the meaning of the rhetorical terms and abbreviations employed, there is no certainty that he or she will know how to correct the errors that have been committed.

Strategy Three: Rewriting the Student's Paper

Example:

If I am going to enjoy
~~To get the enjoyment out of~~ sports, I prefer

to play a team sport, rather than an individual

one put a lot of pressure on you
~~sport.~~ Individual sports ~~sort of has a bond over~~

because
~~you, where~~ you have to be ~~good, and have to be~~

better than the other guy.

There are different ways in which you
~~Team sports has many options for a person~~

can fit into a team. You
~~to fit in. He~~ may ~~be~~ lacking ~~in his~~ the ability to score,

your
but ~~his~~ defensive play makes up for it.

you're e while playing for a team,
If ~~your~~ lacking confidence ~~in team sports~~

other players
you have the support of the ~~rest of the team~~ to

helps
build it up. ~~All~~ This support ~~could be called~~ team

which to
spirit, ~~Team spirit~~ is very important ~~on~~ the out-

every game.
come of ~~the teams future~~.

Comment: This method of marking often provides more practice to instructors than guidance to students. Some students, especially those who don't suffer from the sin of pride, don't mind this kind of marking. In fact, they may like it, especially if they have an instructor who expects them to revise. If this paper is merely rewritten in their own handwriting, it might bring some students a pleasant (though false) sense of achievement. If, on the other hand, the "revised version" is presented as a model, then the strategy should form part of a broader instructional design, gradually leading the students away from this kind of dependence.

Strategy Four: Group Marking

Example: Group (or peer) marking involves dividing a composition class into small groups. Students are invited to read over and to comment on essays written by other members of the group. Various modifications of this strategy are possible. In one variation, groups of three to five may be organized to read one another's papers: no attempt at anonymity is made. Alternatively, the individual groups may deal only with writing from outside their group, with complete anonymity being intended. In the former situation, discussion of each paper may be verbal and informal; in the latter, comments will need to be written down and passed along more formally to the writers.

In either instance, some criteria for marking each paper need to be established or developed, perhaps something along the lines of the scheme outlined below in Strategy Five. Just how much time each marking group will be given to deal with a set of papers will depend on the general framework of instruction: a period of 45 minutes to deal with three relatively short essays is probably adequate. Also, the kind of evaluation (a general comment or some kind of letter grade) that is to be placed by the class members on the work of their peers (and whether this judgment should "count" as an entry in the instructor's workbook) are decisions that instructors should address. Peer comments may be best limited to assessing the general effectiveness of the writing as a piece of communication, and to offering suggestions of a helpful editorial nature, rather than identifying all the faults.

Comment: For obvious reasons, this strategy has to be handled with some care. It does have the advantage of allowing class members to become familiar with the work of other students. It also provides an opportunity for a change of pace in the classroom, and it creates an opportunity for all students to participate profitably in group discussion. Not least, it enables writing to be directed to an audience larger than just the instructor.

However, the parameters for judgment have to be clearly established ahead of time. Group members need to have firmly in hand some kind of measuring stick or set of checklists with which to evaluate the essays they are to read. Perhaps in the first sessions involving this kind of activity, it will be sufficient if those participating just communicate to the individual writers some comment related to how "interesting" or "readable" each paper seems to be, and to offer some suggestions as to how interest or readability might have been increased. It is especially important that the instructor monitor the judgments of the groups so that the comments are tempered by kindness, and that inexperience on the part of the evaluators does not lead to unfair or misleading judgments.

With skillful handling on the part of the instructor, this strategy for marking can operate in an increasingly sophisticated and beneficial way, but it does require something of a master hand in setting it up. It may not necessarily "solve" the instructor's marking problem, but it can be used as a fruitful means of increasing the amount, quality, and informality of student writing. In most cases, it will amply repay the initial investment of organizational effort.

Strategy Five: Making a Writing Profile

Example:

Element	Sample Comment
Idea	The essay does have a central idea, though there are some debatable generalizations. For example, is it always "your choice" to move up into a professional career?
Structure	Overall plan is good. Four reasons are given in support of the central idea.
Development of Ideas	This tends to be a bit thin. The longest paragraphs have only three sentences. There is a specific example in paragraph two, but not in any of the other developing paragraphs.
Sentences	It is good that there are no sentence fragments. There is, though, one run-on sentence in paragraph five. In general, the sentence structure is a touch short and choppy.
Words	This seems the main problem area. Watch subject-verb agreement ("Team sports_____") and the use of an adjective instead of an adverb ("you have to do_____"). Also check in your dictionary to see if there is such a word as "nodoubtedly."
Spelling	Check spelling of words in lines 8, 13, and 17.
Punctuation	Some problems with apostrophes in paragraphs three and four.
Use of Metaphor	The essay contains several interesting attempts at using figurative language. "The ladder of competition" is good, but "has a bond over you" doesn't create a very clear image. Also see paragraph four: do we **pursue** alleys or **follow** them?
General Comment	The organization is good, but more care in revising word choice is necessary.

Comment: This approach to marking is more time-consuming than those mentioned so far, but it does have an element of instruction that the other methods lack. It works best in teaching situations where all the different elements of rhetoric (structure, development, sentence structure) have already been discussed with the students. When the individual members of a class are aware of what each of these terms means, the instructor can make brief, note-like comments, especially if this strategy is to be combined with an interview. Finally, the approach does have the special quality of enabling an instructor to temper criticism with some praise.

Strategy Six: The Interview

Example: After the writer has handed in a composition and the instructor has read it over quickly, the student is invited to meet with the instructor to "go over" the paper. A specific day and time is decided upon mutually. Before the interview, the instructor will have made some notes that are similar to (though briefer than) those listed in Strategy Five. By this time, the intructor will also have decided which **one** aspect of the student's writing can most profitably be discussed during the interview, which need not be more than fifteen minutes in length.

In the case of "Team Sports," it might be profitable to help the student realize that several of the phrases in the essay do not clearly communicate their meaning to the reader. This is especially true of the following:

> "sort of has a bond over you";
>
> "on the outcomes of the teams future";
>
> "there are many alleys to pursue in team sports."

Although these are not the only problems that the essay presents, the experienced instructor knows that trying to deal with more than a few specific aspects of the writing may be harmful, not helpful.

In dealing with the essay, the instructor might justifiably begin by saying something positive about the sentences, simple though these are, and by commenting in an encouraging way about the student's natural inclination to express ideas metaphorically. A fuller discussion of metaphor might be carried on in a subsequent interview. The bulk of the interview might then be spent in getting the student (**not** the instructor) to rephrase the awkward statements in the essay. While doing this, the attitude of the instructor should be to suggest that the errant phrases are not so much **wrong** as just not absolutely **clear** to the reader.

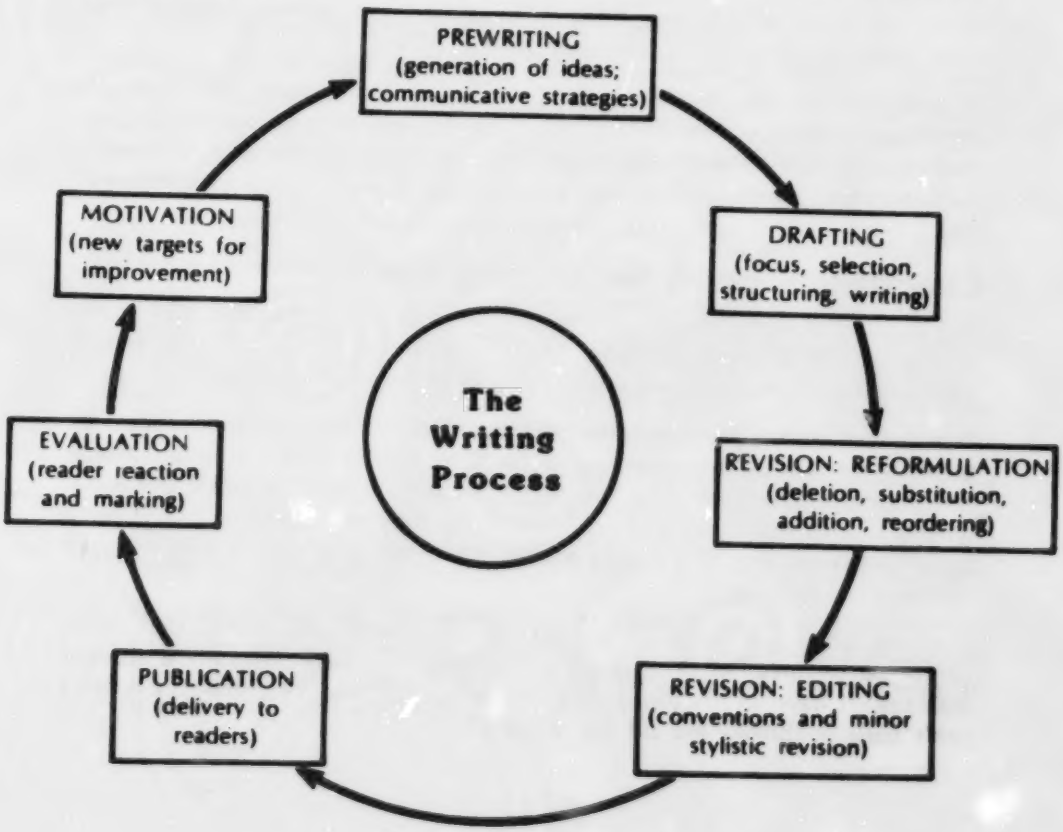
The instructor, in short, should attempt during the interview to shed the role of Critical English Teacher, and don the garb of the Friendly Editor, someone who is genuinely interested in helping the student do something that is important to both of them, that is, to write better.

Comment: For those readers who are convinced that Strategy Six is an idealistic but unworkable system, the author of this article modestly suggests that they give it at least one more chance. It is a strategy that has proved very successful for a number of instructors frustrated by other approaches to one of the most enduring challenges of English teaching.

5. USING CHECKLISTS TO ASSESS AND IMPROVE THE WRITING PROCESS

There is nothing new about the use of checklists as an evaluation tool. Traditional evaluation methods have long used checklists to assess the competence of a piece of writing. However, the focus of process-oriented assessment is on improvement of the writing process, not simply on evaluation of the written product.

The various phases of the writing process, shown below, indicate the two phases perhaps most suitable for checklist use: revision and evaluation. Revision may be the most critical component of the writing process; therefore, it is central to any process-oriented evaluation procedure. Evaluation that focuses on revision skills ". . . is the natural conclusion of the process of response and negotiation, carried through successive drafts. By negotiating changes rather than dictating them, the teacher returns control of the writing to the student."[1]



This article provides suggestions for the development of checklists that function both as learning and as evaluation tools. It also includes a number of sample checklists adaptable for classroom use.

Checklists Encourage Students to Read and Revise

Developing skill in revision means developing skill also as a critical reader of one's own text. It is through close reading of their own prose that experienced writers correct unclear statements, consider other ideas they were unable to focus on before, and discover the evolving meaning of their texts.

Experienced and inexperienced writers differ significantly in their reading and revising strategies. Inexperienced writers often fail to revise their work. They also have difficulty rereading their writing from the perspective of a critical reader. Most often they don't read their work at all. In a recent study[2] only 40% of a randomly selected group of high school students ever stopped to look back and see what they were writing.

When inexperienced writers are directed to revise their work ("Hand in a draft and a good copy"), the "good copy" is often no more than a neater version of the original. It may be that no substantive changes have been made. Many students are simply unable to see the need to improve the expression of their ideas. They may not even be aware of the options.

A well-constructed checklist can help focus the writer's attention on significant aspects of the writing task. In this way the writer develops new reading and revising skills. For example, a poor reader may not be able to evaluate which elements of a writing task are most important. A checklist may help.

Checklists Simplify the Writing Process

The number of demands that students must deal with simultaneously in any writing activity is overwhelming. "To pay attention to all of these would overload the information-processing capacity of the most towering intellects."[3]

Experienced writers cope with the cognitive demand of the writing process by breaking the task up into manageable parts. By encouraging a writing-reading-revising cycle, checklists help inexperienced writers learn to tackle the initial writing task in manageable chunks. Then, by directing attention to the most significant constraints of a writing activity, checklists help writers work through the revision process.

Students often get hung-up on editing for correctness rather than concentrating on meaning. The result is cognitive overload. Typically a student may say, "I have all my thoughts in my mind, but when I come to a word I can't spell, it throws me off my writing."

Checklists Help Writers Communicate with Readers

The goal of any writing activity is communication between a writer and a reader. In a process-oriented class the instructor is not the only reader of a student's text. Writers are encouraged to read and comment on the work of their peers. In this way, the instructor ceases to be the only judge of student writing and becomes, instead, another collaborator.

However, peer-editing can create significant problems if student editors are not provided with strategies for focusing on significant elements in writing tasks. A well-constructed checklist system can make peer-editing a more focused, productive activity. Using established criteria while reading another person's writing gives student writers practice in the critical reading skills necessary to take control over their own writing processes.

A checklist that guides the revision process can also be used to guide the evaluation process. If students revise with specific objectives in mind and receive feedback on these same objectives, evaluation will hold no mysteries or surprises for them. The checklist can become a key communication link between the writer and the instructor.

Suggestions for Developing Checklists

The following five suggestions for the development of checklists can be used interchangeably in revision and evaluation. The sample checklists at the end of this article are taken from *Communications 3* (Ministry of Education, 1984).[4] These learning materials also include suggestions for the development of students' pre-writing and composing strategies. Instructors should feel free to adapt the checklists to their own contexts and uses.

1. **Make Checklists to Match the Writing Task:** Checklists should be specific to a particular writing task. A list of questions specifically designed for a particular writing situation will be more useful than a list of general qualities contributing to excellent prose. For example, the constraints involved in writing a business letter are much different from those involved in writing an opinion piece or a letter to a newspaper.

2. **Define the Primary Traits of the Writing Task:** The skills defined in the writing checklist should be those considered most important for the specific writing activity (i.e., the primary traits). When this is done, the writer can focus on controlling those traits most important to that task.

3. **Emphasize Meaning; De-emphasize Mechanics:** Note in the following examples that meaning is given priority over mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, etc. With the emphasis on the primary traits of a writing activity, the writer's attention is more sharply focused.

4. **Make Checklists Easy to Use:** The usefulness of the checklist is greatly improved if writers and readers can all respond to the same set of questions.

   The yes/no format in the following examples is not the most vigorous scoring method possible. It could be replaced by a 1-to-4 numerical system. However, the strength of the yes/no format lies in its ease of use for instructors, writers evaluating their own work, and peer-editors alike.

5. **Evaluate Process, Not Only Product:** A marking system should stress the improvement of the process and not only evaluation of the product. The marking system inherent in the attached checklists grades papers "O.K." or "Revise" depending on the number and importance of "No's." This stresses the importance of continued revision in the writing process. It gives the student the responsibility for both the writing process and the written product.

EXAMPLE 1: FACTUAL WRITING CHECKLIST

	Evaluation of Writing Assignments	
	Student	Instructor
Assignment Number	4-1	4-1
Does your topic sentence limit the topic and encourage a reader to continue?	Yes No	Yes No
Is the process clearly explained in an easy-to-follow sequence?	Yes No	Yes No
Have you included all the necessary information?	Yes No	Yes No
Have you taken out all unnecessary information?	Yes No	Yes No
Are your details specific?	Yes No	Yes No
Have you included transition words to help your reader follow the process?	Yes No	Yes No
Do you end with a "summing up" sentence?	Yes No	Yes No
Have you checked for sentence skills errors and for spelling errors?	Yes No	Yes No
INSTRUCTOR COMMENT		OK Revise

EXAMPLE 2: OPINION WRITING CHECKLIST

	Evaluation of Writing Assignments			
	Student		Instructor	
Assignment Number	4-2	4-3	4-2	4-3
Does your topic sentence limit the topic and encourage a reader to continue?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you given reasons to support your opinion?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you used transition words to help your reader follow your reasons?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you included specific details to support your reasons?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you used order of importance to explain your opinion?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Do you end with a "summing up" sentence that emphasizes your opinion?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you checked for sentence skills errors and for spelling errors?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
INSTRUCTOR COMMENT			OK Revise	OK Revise

EXAMPLE 3: LETTER WRITING CHECKLIST

	Evaluation of Writing Assignments							
	Student				Instructor			
Assignment Number	7-1	7-2	7-3	7-4	7-1	7-2	7-3	7-4
Simple								
Is the purpose of your letter clearly stated in the first paragraph?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Is your message concisely stated?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Complete								
Are all of the necessary 5W-H questions answered in the middle paragraph(s)?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Is the wording of requests specific enough for the reader to act on the information?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Is your letter free from sentence skills errors and spelling errors?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you followed correct business letter format?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Action								
Is there a call for action courteously stated in the last paragraph?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Tone								
Is your tone appropriate for a business letter?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
INSTRUCTOR COMMENT					OK Revise	OK Revise	OK Revise	OK Revise

EXAMPLE 4: REPORT WRITING CHECKLIST

	Evaluation of Writing Assignments	
	Student	**Instructor**
Assignment Number	6-4	6-4
Is your main idea clearly stated in the first paragraph in a way that encourages the reader to continue?	Yes No	Yes No
Is your main idea well-supported in your summary section with essential information in the articles?	Yes No	Yes No
Do your comments and conclusions follow reasonably from the information in the articles?	Yes No	Yes No
Are your ideas stated concisely?	Yes No	Yes No
Have you linked your ideas with effective transition words?	Yes No	Yes No
Are your ideas organized in an ordering system that suits your topic?	Yes No	Yes No
Does your report have a title and appropriate headings?	Yes No	Yes No
Is your report free from spelling errors and sentence skills errors?	Yes No	Yes No
INSTRUCTOR COMMENT		OK Revise

EXAMPLE 5: NARRATION CHECKLIST

	Evaluation of Writing Assignments					
	Student			Instructor		
Assignment Number	3-1	3-2	3-3	3-1	3-2	3-3
Does your story have a beginning, middle, and an end?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you sharpened the image of your story by using **specific** words and phrases?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you made clear the "what, when, who, where, why and how" of your story?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you followed time order (or another logical plan) in your story?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you used transitions to help the reader follow the events of your story?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you checked for sentence skills errors?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Have you checked for spelling errors?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
INSTRUCTOR COMMENT				OK Revise	OK Revise	OK Revise

References

[1] L. Brannon and C. Knoblauch, "On Student's Rights to Their Own Texts," *College Composition and Communication,* 33 (May 1982), pp. 157-66.

[2] M. Scardamalia, "How Children Cope with the Cognitive Demands of Writing," *Writing: The Nature, Development and Teaching of Written Communication,* Vol. 2, (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1981), pp. 81-104.

[3] Carl Bereiter, "Development in Writing," in *Cognitive Processes in Writing,* ed. L. Gregg and E. Steinberg (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1980), pp. 157-66.

[4] British Columbia, Ministry of Education, Research and Curriculum Development Branch, *Communications 3* (Victoria, B.C., 1984).

6. TOWARDS AN EXTERNAL STANDARD THE ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST

Understandably, many instructors of composition would like to have a clearly defined standard of achievement by means of which they could confidently evaluate student writing. No such absolute standard exists. What possibly comes closest to such an external standard — or at least to a set of external guidelines — is the English Placement Test (EPT) that has been administered in British Columbia over the past six years. This article describes the nature of the test itself and summarizes the standards it has attempted to define.

The purpose of the English Placement Test is, as its name attests, student placement. More specifically, it is related to placement in a particular type of first-year English course in a British Columbia college, university, or institute. Traditionally, "Freshman English" (to use a term that is now dated, if not sexist) had a relatively standard curriculum, no matter where in Canada it was taught. Usually it was a blend of advanced composition and, for the most part, contemporary literature written in English. But about twenty years ago, circumstances surrounding Freshman English began to change. More and more students from quite varied backgrounds and with quite varied abilities began to register in our colleges and universities. With only a few exceptions, a first year course in something called "English" was required. Among this new post-secondary population were adults who had not completed high school, recent graduates from high school who had not been even average achievers in English (though they had completed twelve years of school), and an ever-increasing number of immigrants for whom English was a second language.

In order to attempt to deal with this diversity, the colleges and universities got together and petitioned the authorities to establish an across-the-province English Placement Test. This was done, and the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia was appointed the agency that would administer all aspects of the test. The first sitting of the EPT took place in the spring of 1977, when 17 000 high school students throughout the province wrote the first of the exams. By the fall of that year, most of the colleges and the universities (Simon Fraser University and North Island College were the exceptions) had established a set of placement norms related to the scores made available to them by means of the EPT and had tied these norms to the various courses they would offer to students.

During the years that the test has been available, there have been some changes in the number and the kind of scores sent to the students who take it. Essentially, the test now differentiates between five different types of students: (a) those who have problems with English because it is not their native language; (b) those who are native speakers but who suffer from a serious literacy problem; (c) those who are essentially literate native speakers but who have trouble organizing and writing an essay; (d) those who are both literate and can write the language competently; and (e) those who enjoy exceptional language capabilities.

At the present time, each of the post-secondary educational institutions that makes use of the EPT results has developed a variety of first-year sections into which students are placed in accordance with their test scores on the EPT. Most of these colleges and universities, incidentally, are also prepared to move a student into a more appropriate section if it appears that the initial placement was, for whatever reason, erroneous. In general, the EPT has proved to be an effective first screening of large numbers of students.

The EPT has two parts, though students who write it receive five separate grades. Part one is concerned with English usage and requires examinees to pick out errors in a series of individual sentences. Some of these sentences are correct, but the majority contain errors that are typical of second-language speakers, or errors that are typical of native-speakers who require remedial help in English. After this part of the paper has been machine scored, the computer sorts the students' achievement into two parts and prepares two separate grades, both out of 20. One grade indicates a student's ability to identify "ESL-type" errors; the other the ability to identify "Remedial-type" errors.

The second part of the paper requires those taking the test to write an expository essay. After this has been graded, the student receives three marks, again each out of 20. One is for content and development; one is for sentence structure; and one is for writer's use of words. Table 1, which follows, summarizes typical scores of five different levels of achievers on the English Placement Test, scores which any college and university is free to interpret and apply.

TABLE 1: TYPICAL EPT SCORES OF FIVE LEVELS OF STUDENT

	Usage Questions		Essay Questions		
	ESL	Remedial	Content and Development	Sentences	Words
An Exceptional Student in English	20/20	19/20	17/20	18/20	18/20
A Good-to-Average Student	17/20	15/20	13/20	14/20	12/20
A Literate Student with Writing Problems	16/20	14/20	8/20	8/20	6/20
A Remedial Native Speaker	14/20	7/20	6/20	7/20	4/20
A Non-Native Speaker	5/20	3/20	5/20	4/20	3/20

Since the usage section on the EPT is fairly standard in its form, nothing further need be said about it at this point. Instead, the standards that are applied to a fairly typical set of EPT essays will be described and illustrated.

A document entitled "Standard for Grading" is used as a guideline for the markers of the EPT essays. This document is, it should be noted, readily available to all schools (or to individuals planning to write the EPT) well before the examination is written. It seems, indeed, that "Standard For Grading" has had some effect in defining the standard for achievement in composition expected at the high school graduation level. The chart itself has worked reasonably well as a guide to markers, despite an inherent problem in its structure: the definitions in the top categories describe positive attributes of writing; the bottom category negative ones. The middle category consists primarily of negative statements carefully modified. In any case, by means of these guidelines, the EPT markers feel they are able to provide individual students and their respective institutions with specific information about the quality of their writing, or at least about what they wrote for the EPT.

TABLE 2: EPT STANDARD FOR GRADING (ERIBC)

Score	Content Development & Structure	Sentences	Words
10 9 8 7	Presents a clear and reasonably original central claim or thesis. Develops the central claim by means of specific details and illustrations. Is organized so that the argument is easy to follow. Has a suitable introduction and a conclusion that grows naturally out of the development. Has exact but not excessive transition.	The sentences are precise, correct and varied. Employs sentences containing effective subordination and co-ordination. If rhetorical devices such as parallelism, repetition, contrast and metaphor are employed, they are used in a clear and appropriate way. Employs punctuation that contributes to sentence clarity.	Makes use of correct and precise vocabulary. Shows evidence of the ability to express ideas in a lively and original way. Is direct and concise. Contains few spelling errors.
6 5 4	The central claim or argument is either self-evident, dubious, one-sided or not entirely clear. Has weak paragraph development; additional supporting details should have been included. Has excessiviey mechanical structure. The introduction is either non-existent or too long; there is no relevant conclusion. Has ineffective transition.	The essay contains the occasional sentence fragment or run-on sentence. Is marred by errors such as faulty pronoun reference, incorrect subject-verb agreement, misplaced or dangling modifiers, inexact parallelism. Has a tendency towards the repetition of one or two basic sentence patterns. Does not consistently use punctuation correctly or necessary punctuation is missing.	Contains some examples of fractured idiom. Tends to be unnecessarily wordy. Has some ineffective repetition of words. Expresses ideas by means of a basically limited vocabulary. Contains spelling errors, though not in everyday words.
3 2 1 0	Has no clearly discernible central idea. Consists primarily of underdeveloped (single-sentence) paragraphs. Is overly general; seldom specific. Wanders; has no clear overall plan. Makes no effort to provide transition. Is basically confused and confusing.	Employs mostly simple sentences. Has incomplete or run-on sentences. Contains several instances of loose pronoun reference or inexact subject-verb agreement. Contains unclear sentences. Frequently employs incorrect punctuation or omits necessary punctuation.	Employs many fractured idioms. Contains several words used incorrectly and inexactly. Is dependent on numerous trite or informal expressions. Contains many spelling errors; common words are misspelled.

The six essays reproduced below (with their imperfections still intact) represent something of the quality of achievement and the range of marks on a fairly typical set of EPT essays. The examples are presented in an ascending order by quality, although the top category of a truly excellent paper has not been included. Each essay is on the same topic: examinees were asked to define what for them would be "A Perfect Summer Holiday." In the actual test, all writers had a choice of nine different topics. The topics are different for each sitting, and not all of them are as bland as the holiday topic. These essays were produced during a July exam, and so it is likely that the writers are not grade twelve students but adults who are either recent arrivals in Canada or who have been out of the regular school system for a year or more.

The commentary that accompanies the following samples is regrettably not the type of thing that is sent to students. It is added here in order to explain and support the numerical grades assigned.

Sample A

Example:

Amazing so many Japanese travellers have been visiting to Canada. Whenever I am trespassing through the Vancouver Airport, each time I can see many tourist groupes around there. It wasn't before, say early "70", I could see but not liked this many. They may have enough money nowaday but they have own phylosophy I guess.

Japanese used to save money at first after enough amount of money then they are going to spend. So nowaday they saved up already that why they could spend extra money in any way, anyhow. What I want to say is somehow Canadians spend a money without good thinking. I cannot write easily the perfect summer holiday. I have to confess of this. I was too busy to have summer holiday due to my occupation. Canadians like leisure first pay later its some kind of a commercial.

Grades Assigned: Content — 1/20; Sentences — 3/20; Words — 1/20.

Commentary: Quite obviously this is an ESL paper. What has been written shows evidence of an intelligent person who is as yet incapable of expressing fairly complex ideas in a new language. Though no clear idea gets adequately developed, there is some evidence to indicate that the writer knows what a sentence is but is lacking in the vocabulary to set down a clear idea.

Placement for this student would be in an ESL section or course.

Sample B

Example:

An unforgettable summer holiday is found in the desserted Lybian sea shore.

The Lybian beaches are one of the most natural, unpoluted, desserted and beautiful I have ever seen. A tent by the sea shore would be a perfect summer holiday. I like to be awakened by the sound of the waves and bread the morning odor of the sea weeds. As the time runs through the day from morning to noon the day gets hotter and hotter until the heat gets inseportable, then a bath is the only thought in my mind. All along the Lybia shore the deapet of the water is very low which makes it very warm. This is the only summer holiday I would consider perfect.

Grades Assigned: Content — 3/20; Sentence — 4/20; Words — 4/20.

Commentary: This seems more the writing of a native speaker with literacy problems than the work of an ESL student. There is an idea presented, but it is not developed very fully or very systematically. The writer does not lack vocabulary, but some of the spelling indicates a greater listening than reading vocabulary: "bread" for "breathe" and "deapet" for "depth," for example. The student has some sentence awareness but the thoughts tend to be incompletely expressed. (A "tent" does not in itself make a "holiday.")

Placement for this student would be in a remedial section, probably in a non-credit class.

Sample C

Example:

The perfect summer holiday as compiled through the tourism office of British Columbia would be Queen Charlote Islands.

The Queen Charlote Islands are isolated and cut off from the rest of British Columbia. A tropical paradise is located on these solitude islands off B.C.'s North coast. Fish and animals for hunting are in abundant quantities.

The largest Island is Moresby Island. This Island holds the bulk of the inhabitants of the Islands.

Small communities are located along the small highway, which links Moresby Island to Graham Island. This highway is the main road and link to civilization. These communities consist of Masset, Tlell, Port Clements, Charlote City and Sandspit. Two large Indian reservations are located on Moresby Island. They are the remains of the Haida civilization which once ruled the Northern Coast of B.C. These reservations are Scidigat and Haida City.

The Islands are over run with deer so as a result hunting is a year round sport. The Bald Eagle and the Peraguin Falcon are seen in abundance.

The Queen Charlote Islands is the ideal place for a vacation.

Grades Assigned: Content — 6/20; Sentences — 8/20; Words — 7/20.

Commentary: An idea is certainly present and there is some attempt at development of it, but it is jerky and thin. Most of the sentences are simple, but correct. There are numerous problems with vocabulary.

Placement for this student would be in an essay writing class where an instructor could explain the need to develop an idea systematically, avoid redundancy of ideas, be more careful about pronoun reference, and so on.

Sample D

Example:

The only way to travel is by a camper van. Anyone who takes the train or bus doesn't know how to enjoy themselves. By taking a camper there are no limits. You can see all the scenery. You can stop anywhere. You can make your own schedule of travel.

First of all by taking a camper you can see all of the scenery. What I mean by all of the scenery is you're not flying over it at a couple of hundred miles and hour. And you're not driving by in a bus at 3:00 in the morning. By taking your own camper van you can see everything at your desired speed and distance. You are flexible to slow down and gaze at any topic you want to see more of.

Also when you take your own camper you are free to stop anywhere. Unlike a plane or bus when you take your own camper you are free to stop along the way to do anything you wish. You can stop to go shopping in a nearby mall. Or you can just relax and eat a few sandwiches and have a couple of drinks. Another plus about taking your own camper van is you can make your own schedule of travel. The good thing about this is that you can sleep in until all hours of the day and not worry about missing a bus tour.

In conclusion, you would be crazy to take a vacation by another means than a camper van.

Grades Assigned: Content — 8/20; Sentences — 9/20; Words — 7/20.

Commentary: A slap-dash but not illiterate paper. The idea is a rather dubious generalization, but the writer has made some effort to develop it with specific details. There is a rudimentary kind of organization, although the writer forgot to separate the second and third parts of the central claim into two paragraphs, lumping them both into paragraph three, perhaps because the essential difference between "you can stop anywhere" and "you can make your own schedule" wasn't all that strong. The writer has several problems with standard English idiom, such as in "flexible to slow down" and "at your desired speed." This aspect of the writing lowers the mark in the Words section.

Placement for this student would be in an essay writing course.

Sample E

Example:

Lingering in my mind is the urge to set myself free in a paradise of endless opportunities, where I may meet new people, their cultures and discover new ideas and ways. Where else would one go other than Europe? Europe, being a small continent laden with many countries, offers a wide range of tourist interest including its outgoing and friendly people, their past and present, their cities of empowering beauty, romance and unity. I would be able to learn their languages, explore their array of different architecture and feel the beauty that their part of the world has to offer. Learning about mankind by exploring what he has accomplished would give one a better chance of understanding himself, his world and those around him. This would target a being closer into the sense of brotherhood that all men should have.

Understanding and learning from a vacation is a very good aspect, but one should also sit back and relax and take time to heed himself away from life's pressures and closer to a sense of peace of mind. Then and only then would one have truly absorbed all that he could from his leisure time. It would be a waste not to do so.

In conclusion, I feel that a holiday should not be waisted, but used fruitfully to the limit. One should learn all that he can and at the same time enjoy himself to the fullest. Once having accomplished this, one can truly say that he has benefitted from his holiday and his time. Travelling can help us understand the world and why we exist and show us that we must elaborate in our brotherhood.

Grades Assigned: Content — 12/20; Sentences — 16/20; Words — 10/20.

Commentary: In some ways, this is a more difficult paper to deal with than the earlier ones, since its quality is rather uneven. The sentence structure is quite sophisticated, and the idea being expressed, though not terribly original, is not overly simplistic. The problem the writer has is word choice. The writer knows a number of words but is not sure how to use them: "laden with many countries," "target a being closer into a sense of brotherhood," and "we must elaborate in our brotherhood" are all fractured English. In addition, the writer is basically verbose. Although this is not a long essay, it could have been shortened by about half without much of its substance being lost in the process.

Placement for this student could be into a regular English class (where the instructor could help the student take hold of a vocabulary) or into an essay writing course where ultimately the student would probably do very well.

Sample F

Example:

Now that it is the sixth of July, it is only natural to begin thinking about summer holiday. The perfect summer holiday would be a three-month trip by car from Athens to London. The highlights of this trip would range from basking on golden beaches in Greece to climbing the many steps of the Tower of London.

To start the vacation in Athens gives you the opportunity to relax and unwind after a long sixteen hour airplane flight from Vancouver. Just a short drive out of Athens are many beautiful beaches where you can work on your suntan and swim in the warm water. When it becomes time to eat there is nothing more relaxing than sitting in an open-air taverna sipping ouzo and savouring the taste of fresh figs.

After relaxing in Greece for two or three weeks, the second leg of the journey takes you through Italy, Switzerland and France. These countries have many colorful customs and traditions, for example, winding down a canal in a gondola while being seranaded by a violinist, sampling fresh goats milk high amongst the alps, and participating in wine-tasting festivals in the French countryside.

In addition to the varied customs and traditions of these countries also the challenge of learning a new language. There is a very satisfying feeling of being able to order your meal or ask directions in the language of the country you are in. As most Canadians have some basic training in the French language, a vacation in these countries would enable you to expand on that basic knowledge.

With only a couple of weeks left the last stop would be London. Here, in this sprawling metropolis is something for everyone. There are many historical sights for a vistor to see, both the Tower of London and St. Paul's Cathedral are steeped in the past. In London there is one of the worlds first zoo's that houses many rare animals such as the Panda bear, a native of China. Roadside pubs should not be missed for those who like to talk with the local residents. It is also here in London where a shopping trip to Harrods should be planned. Harrods is a department store that covers one square block and has six floors of international goods — not to be missed.

Travelling by car from Athens to London would be the perfect summer holiday. This journey offers a broad variety of activities for all age groups no matter what their interests are — be it relaxing on hot, sunny beaches or touring the many old historical sights.

Grades Assigned: Content — 16/20; Sentences — 15/20; Words — 15/20.

Commentary: Although not an example of truly first-rate writing, this paper is quite adequate and certainly superior to any of the other examples included here. The idea is straightforward and clear, and the development is easily followed, though it is a touch mechanical. There are a couple of shaky sentences (the first sentence in paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 are all somewhat loose), but the sentence structure is generally competent. The word choice is not in any way original or lively, but it is correct and exact.

This student would be placed in a regular English section though probably not in a section for students with outstanding talent in English.

7. TESTING SPELLING

Given that the goal of writing is to communicate one's ideas clearly to another person, the importance of correct spelling is fairly obvious. As newspaper readers will attest, even a minor slip of spelling may completely overturn a writer's intended message; note the world of difference between an article on "How to Flatten Your Stomach" and one on "How to Fatten Your Stomach." Spelling errors do get in the way of communication.

The way to give a spelling test also seems quite straightforward. Put together a list of words and see if the student can spell them. Percentage of words correct gives you a rough idea of spelling ability. Then you can either compare this score with those of others (either in the class or in a table of norms), or spend a little more time and use the test as a "diagnostic," looking for consistent error patterns.

On closer inspection, however, there are some important and significant choices to be made about the goals, form, and content of spelling tests.

Goals

First, relate the goal of testing to the goal of instruction. Suppose the broad goal of spelling instruction is to enable adults to develop and use strategies that will lead to independence of spelling. Then, the goal of testing is simply to find out what spelling strategies students have developed, and how far along the road they are to being independent of dictionaries, people, and, perhaps, spelling anxiety. Note that this goal doesn't indicate any comparison with how other people spell. Should this be your testing goal, then clearly other implications would follow.

Form

Secondly, consider the broad choices for the form of the test. Put succinctly ("I had to check that one in the dictionary"), the choices are

- an oral or written test;
- in a list or in a context;
- with or without a dictionary; or
- with or without a time limit.

If, as an adult educator, you are concerned about the real-life validity of a spelling program and its tests, then you may want to consider what it is that people actually have to be able to do from day to day with respect to spelling. The *ABE English and Communications Curriculum Guide*[1] lists two such tasks.

1. **Without** a dictionary, spell correctly most of the words needed for individual purposes.

2. **With** a dictionary, locate or check the correct spelling of less familiar words used for writing.

Note that there is (purposely) no mention of time limits, nor of spelling as many words as anyone else, nor of learning the 8, 18, or 80 spelling rules listed in a textbook. Indeed, if these matters are what you wish to investigate, then you will want to seriously consider using standardized tests of spelling. Typically, such tests (as those included in ABLE, or TABE, or the GED) have strict time limits and include words that may or may not be relevant to, or even known by, the student. They are put together primarily for the purpose of comparing spelling "performance" to that of a norm group. Often, as in the GED items, a student is asked only to recognize correct spelling rather than to produce it. Unfortunately, this format also presents the student with a confusing array of possible misspellings — hardly a desirable context for learning.

As always, it is for you to decide what you want to test and what you are going to do with the results. Should you wish to adopt a more informal (instructor-made) approach to testing spelling, as a replacement or even a supplement to the standardized test, then the following suggestions about content may be useful.

Content

The content of a spelling test is shaped by its specific test objectives. The *Basic Literacy Assessment Kit*,[2] for instance, specifies nine objectives, any of which can form the basis of an informal spelling test (i.e., one that is made up by an instructor and is not standardized with respect to formal administration or norm-group interpretation). Though the kit was originally designed for use in basic literacy programs, the spelling items are quite adaptable to any level of adult education. In terms of what the adult is required to do, the test objectives are as follows.

1. Spell words important for the completion of common forms.

2. Spell selected high frequency words from the context of the student's vocational or personal interest area.

3. Spell words most frequently used in one's own writing.

4. Spell words most frequently misspelled in one's own writing.

5. Write common abbreviations and symbols, including dates.

6. Demonstrate knowledge of terms used in the study of spelling.

7. Identify and correct spelling errors in a sample of prose written by another person.

8. Locate a word in a dictionary, in order to check its spelling.

9. Demonstrate a consistent and systematic method of learning to spell a new word.

The general adaptability of these specifications for almost any adult context, including business, technical, and vocational fields, will be self-evident. A few comments seem appropriate for the last three items.

Objective 7 is the basis of many test items in textbooks and standardized tests: it is a skill surely needed by secretaries, proofreaders, editors, and instructors. Most other people, however, are more concerned with Objectives 3 and 4.

Objective 8 focuses on a person's ability to use a dictionary in a realistic situation. Unfortunately, too many textbook exercises, modules, and tests provide only a simulation of actual dictionary use, quizzing people about guide-words and alphabetic principles, rather than having them actually use them with a real dictionary. Example 1 (see below) provides a way to observe how a student actually goes about finding a word in a dictionary.

What do people really learn from the study of spelling? **Objective 9** relates this question to the context of "lifelong learning." The characteristics that seem to distinguish good spellers from the rest are that these people not only can spell most of the words they need but also have developed one other "knack" — the ability to learn the spelling of any **new** word. Instructors curious to see how this ability might be tested will find Example 2 of interest.

What ever the content of the spelling assessment, the yield should be a considerable amount of useful information about the specific spelling competence of students, in the context of their own needs. It should be noted that even blind or deaf students probably need to spell, and may also become quite proficient at the skill. Example 3, therefore, provides a general guide to analyzing a student's spelling product and observing how students tackle the **process**.

This article concludes with a somewhat reactionary question: What might you find out about a person's spelling without even giving a test? Example 4, a starter recipe for an informal spelling interview, will be of interest to those instructors who may prefer to talk with people rather than "test" them, however informally.

EXAMPLE 1: DICTIONARY TEST ITEM AND OBSERVATION GUIDE

Test Item: This is a **direct, individual** assessment of the skill. Dictate to the student a total of about ten words to check in the dictionary. These should be words the student **does not know confidently** how to spell.

The words may be

- words recently misspelled in individual writing;
- words the student may need to spell in the context of job, other courses, or personal life;
- words from an appropriate "common error" list.

For each of the ten test words, the student should have written down a possible spelling which can be checked in the dictionary and corrected if necessary. The instructor should also make sure the student knows the meaning of each of the test words before consulting the dictionary.

As the student uses the dictionary, observe his or her search strategy using a checklist such as is shown in the following observation guide.

Observation Guide:

- Uses a possible spelling of a word as a starting point.
- Shows facility in use of alphabetical order.
- Uses initial consonant and initial vowel sound as a guide.
- Uses prefix as a guide to location.
- Checks possible alternative consonant spellings (e.g., **ph**, or **f**, **n**, or **kn**, **c**, or **s**).
- Checks possible alternative vowel spellings (e.g., **e**, **ee**, **ea**, or **e-e**).
- Deals with derived or inflected words that may not appear as dictionary entry (e.g., "cheerfully" under "cheerful").
- Uses definitions to check that located word is the correct one for the context.
- Uses dictionary to check for homonyms.
- Copies accurately the correct spelling.
- Uses consistent, effective strategies **other** than those listed to achieve the same aim (i.e., standard spelling accuracy).

EXAMPLE 2: HOW DO YOU LEARN TO SPELL A NEW WORD?

Test Objectives: Demonstrate a consistent and systematic method of learning to spell a new word.

This is the most important, summative skill to assess in a spelling improvement program. Although the assessment can be done only one-to-one, it yields highly valid information about spelling proficiency.

Procedure:

1. Take **five** words from a sample of the student's own writing, or from any other relevant context. Try to include some longer words with prefixes and suffixes, and some words with double consonants or tricky vowel sounds. These are the test words to be learned.
2. Ask the student to start **now** to learn these words in preparation for a spelling test the following day.
3. The student may use any method that works.
4. The student has two tasks:
   - to aim at getting 100% on the test next day;
   - to explain how the words are learned.

Some allowances may need to be made for students who have special learning problems or who have difficulty verbalizing about how they study.

Performance Checklist — Learning Spelling:

1. Shows a **consistent** method of learning to spell words.
2. Shows a **systematic** method of learning spelling.
3. Uses a system of word analysis to learn to spell parts of a word:
   - uses syllabication;
   - uses prefix/root/suffix approach;
   - uses some phonics approach;
   - uses rule of spelling (e.g., doubling, rhyme).

4. Uses a consistent memory strategy:
   - writes the word alone or in a sentence;
   - says the word in isolation of a sentence;
   - listens to the word when read by another person or on a tape;
   - traces the letters with a pen, pencil, or finger;
   - closes eyes to visualize the word;
   - uses any other effective, systematic method of study.

Score of post-test next day: ____ correct, out of ____

EXAMPLE 3: SPELLING DIAGNOSIS

The Product: Common error patterns to look for in a list of misspelling.

- Omissions: silent letters, sounded letters, double letters.
- Additions: insertion of extra letters, incorrect doubling.
- Reversals: of two or more letters or the whole word.
- Phonetic substitution: similar sounding vowel, consonant, syllable or word.
- Non-phonetic substitution: dissimilar in sound.
- Confusion caused by mispronunciation.

The Process: Other things to observe about a student's approach to spelling.

Does the student

- seem to have a workable system of spelling a word?
- know when the word "looks right"?
- produce words of about the same length as the test word?
- spell at least some words automatically?
- use a method of breaking down a word into parts?
- use "visualizing" as an aid (closing the eyes to recall spelling)?
- use writing and rewriting as an aid to recall?
- write illegibly to cover up spelling uncertainty?
- recognize and use spelling patterns (phonograms)?
- seem to associate a pattern of letters with a sound?
- spell better "out loud" than in writing?
- pronounce words correctly?
- have difficulty remembering things?
- show anxiety about spelling?

EXAMPLE 4: STARTER RECIPE FOR INFORMAL SPELLING INTERVIEW

The following can be modified any way you please.

1. So you think you need any help in spelling? In what way?
2. What kind of words would you like to spell better?
3. When someone asks you how to spell a word, do you write it first or just say the letters?
4. When **you** ask someone how to spell a word, would you rather they write it or just say the letters?
5. Do you try to spell a word by the way it sounds or by the way it looks? (Adjust this question for blind or deaf students).
6. Can you tell by looking at a word it it's spelled correctly?
7. Can you remember any spelling rules? Which ones? Were they any good to you?
8. What parts of a word do you have trouble with (e.g., double letters, two vowels together)?
9. What is the best way for you to learn to spell a new word?
10. This is a new start for you, and you don't have to go back to the beginning. You can spell a lot of words already. In this book (or kit, or program) where could you start?

10. This is a new start for you, and you don't have to go back to the beginning. You can spell a lot of words already. In this book (or kit, or program) where could you start?

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[2] British Columbia, Ministry of Education, Continuing Education Division, *Adult Basic Literacy Assessment Kit* (Victoria, B.C.: Queen's Printer, 1981). This kit is available for a fee of $10.00 (plus 10 percent handling) from Publications Services Branch.

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8. HELPING THE BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE WRITER

To begin with, read the following sample of student writing.

> *As a person active in sports, I have found that I prefer to compete in individual rather than in team sports. Primarily, I think this is because I prefer to be self-reliant. It's not that I don't — on many occasions in life — find people dependable, but sometimes when you are participating in a team sport, others will let you down. I prefer to be successful on my own or to fail on my own, and laying blame on others is certainly something I don't like to do. It's true that there is, as the saying goes, "safety in numbers," and in team sports you may make an error without having to take the blame, but I still prefer games where I am on my own and have to be self-reliant.*
>
> *A second reason I prefer individual sports is that I find they provide better opportunities than team sports do for improving your individual skills. When you realize that during a competition you cannot be dependent on anyone else, then you just naturally work harder to hone your own particular talents. As your skills improve, so does your self-confidence, and if you are self-confident, you will have a better chance of performing at the peak of your ability during a competition. And you can add to this one additional advantage; through individual sports, you can develop the habit of independence that can be utilized in other aspects of living.*

The case could certainly **not** be made that the fragment of essay printed above offers a serious challenge to the prose works of E.B. White, Susan Sontag, or Robertson Davies. But it does invite us to think for a few moments about a special category of student we occasionally find in our classes: that of the individual whose native writing ability is a cut or more above the general level of the rest of the class. The sample of prose reproduced above, though it is neither brilliant nor especially illuminating, is both correct and competent. (Compare it, for example, with the quality of the writing sample on a similar topic that was used in Article 4.) At any level of adult basic education, such a piece of prose would doubtless warrant an A, plus a flattering comment. Still, the person who wrote it is far from being a professional writer and can still profit from the right kind of instruction. What would be involved in doing "something more" for this student?

One response would be to do something on the administrative level, by moving the student to a more advanced class where assignments are more demanding and competition is more challenging. But more often than not, such a move is difficult for timetabling and other administrative reasons. There is even the good possibility that such a student does not want to be pushed upwards. Despite their superior abilities, adult students of this type frequently lack confidence, feeling that they should conscientously work their way through all the grade levels that stand between them and the academic goal they are pursuing. In their own minds, they feel they can be fully prepared only by working through all the steps, illogical though this might be.

So students with superior skills remain in your class, even though they are unlikely to gain all that much from the level of instruction that you feel obliged to offer to the rest of your students. The result is that whatever help you can offer such special students has to be in the treatment you give to their essays as they write them. If you have the time, you may think of "special assignments," though this in itself does not solve the real problem, which is that anything this type of student writes will have a kind of surface "perfection." It will contain few errors in spelling, sentence structure, word choice, or mechanics.

It becomes necessary, then, to attempt to move up (so to speak) to a higher level of criticism. This involves shifting the focus of your marking from errors that would be corrected to "adequacies" that could be made into distinctive forms of expression. In short, it involves dealing with matters of style. What you must do is help the student to see that what has been written well could have been written better. Still another way of thinking about this is to motivate the student to abandon writing like a student and instead strive to write like a professional. Once again, this is not an easy step to take; but it can be taken, if the student cares enough. One of the advantages of teaching adults rather than children is that adults, unlike either children or adolescents, are essentially ready to write like real writers. Authorship, unlike musicianship, has very few prodigies.

One of the first things that has to be done is that the student has to have "grades" put in the proper perspective. (We all know about the student who got straight A's from one instructor and then C's and B's in a subsequent writing course where the instructor expected more.) The following simple chart might be a useful aid in gaining this perspective.

Student Writing	D	C	B	A		
Professional Writing				C	B	A

A grade of C on the professional level suggests something that is not especially marketable; that is, no one will want to pay the author for the privilege of publishing it. A-level student writing (at least as it is delineated on the quite arbitrary chart shown above) isn't marketable either; so what the instructor is helping the A-level student writer to do is move up to at least the professional B-level.

Let's consider a few of the things that might be involved in achieving such an aim. In discussing this, it will be convenient from time to time to refer to the sample of student prose that prefaces this article.

1. **The Writing Could Be Made More Specific:** Many student writers believe that what we expect when we ask them to write an essay is a collection of high-level, high-sounding generalizations and platitudes. But most real writing (Emerson is an exception and so is Francis Bacon) is tremendously specific — it names names, provides details, and describes the concrete external world in an accurate way. In the sample we have 200 words on the general subject of "Sport" but not one specific sport or game is identified. What individual sport did the writer enjoy indulging in — channel swimming? Poker for high stakes? Long-distance bicycle racing? What? It is not known, though it should be.

2. **There Could Be Greater Verbal Variety:** There is a certain danger in urging this because it has been know to result in what old-fashioned rhetoric texts identified as "elegant variation," an approach to word choice in which the writer's straining for the eccentric synonym eventually begins to show. In the sample, the word "sport" or "sports" is used five times in the first paragraph, although our language does provide at least a couple of possible alternatives — "games" or "athletics" for example.

3. **Visual Images Could Be Employed:** This is related to being specific, but it involves the use of pictorial language or imagery that allows the reader to **see** the abstractions being presented. Metaphor, in its various forms, is not something that every mind takes to naturally, but not all visual images need to involve figurative language. In the example, "make an error" (in the last sentence of paragraph 1) is an abstraction, while "miss the open net" or "drop a pop fly" are concrete statements that allow the reader to visualize the idea being expressed. Likewise, "hone your particular talents" would be more interesting if it were on the level of "strengthen your backhand" or "improve your putting."

4. **Less Obvious Ideas Could Be Expressed:** This, of course, is a more involved, more debatable conception. But it is of some use to urge our student writers to do something more than "write off the top of their heads." This is not a suggestion that they should strain to express outlandish or freaky ideas, but it does introduce them to the principle that our first thoughts on a subject are not necessarily our best. Recently, the author of this article had the opportunity to read a large number of essays on this topic of "individual sports as opposed to team sports." Nearly all those who felt that individual sports were preferable came up with reasons fairly similar to those expressed by the author of our prefatory sample. None of the writers thought the problem through to, for example, the more interesting notion that for most adults, one of the advantages inherent in individual sports is that they are nearly always easier to arrange than team sports. Finding one partner for a game of tennis is easier than lining up seventeen others for a softball game.

5. **Ideas Could Be More Concisely Expressed:** The piece of prose that doesn't need pruning is indeed a very exceptional thing. Most of us have a tendency to use five words where three or four would be sufficient (or one or two). The writer of our sample could, for instance, take the last part of the opening sentence ("I have found that I prefer to compete in individual rather than in team sports") and trim the fat from it so that it reads, "I prefer individual sports to team sports." Other examples are easy to find. "Laying blame on others is certainly something I don't like to do" is just one of the statements that could have been expressed much more concisely. The proposition is not being put forth at this point that brevity is always best, but the principle of keeping the expression of ideas as concise as possible is one that even good writers have to pay attention to. It is certainly one that even superior student writers can profit from.

Other "improvements" could be suggested for the prose sample we have been discussing, but these five should be sufficient to make the point. For some students who already write reasonably well, we have the opportunity to open up other new and significant visions of what excellent prose can be.

9. THE PASSING PROBLEM

One of the several paradoxes that teachers of writing must face is that even though the method of instruction they have employed has played down the giving of grades for practice pieces (instruction that is based on the belief that writing is a **process**, not just a **product**), the time eventually arrives when the institutuion's computer must be fed some "final grades" for each individual student. There may be a few isolated and very enlightened situations where this final reckoning is not required, but for most ABE instructors, this remains the norm. The need to submit final grades raises a number of rather vexing issues, issues that we cannot pretend to solve but which we can at least raise for examination in the cold light of common sense.

The ideal grading situation is not difficult to formulate, although it is less easy to put into practice. Following assessment either of individual students or of a class, specific goals and objectives are set. Instruction aimed at meeting these objectives then goes on. Following instruction, measurement aimed at assessing mastery of the objectives takes place. Those who have mastered the objectives are said to have passed; those who have not achieved the objectives are either given additional instruction or are taken back to square one and matched up with objectives that they are capable of attaining, a process that might also involve a realignment of individual goals. Failure, it should be noted, plays no part in this ideal scenario.

Regrettably, most of us are not in a position to operate in an ideal world. Reality, with its lack of time, its too large classes, its limited budgets, its imperfect measuring sticks, and its unrealistic student ambitions, intervenes. In the least satisfactory cases, students might sign up for a class, be given minimal assessment and goal analysis, take instruction that may or may not be neatly linked to the introductory assessment, and ultimately be passed or failed.

On what basis should an ABE student be assessed as a success or a failure? Perhaps success should be measured in terms of whether or not the individual student has a **better view** of himself or herself after pursuing a particular unit of study. Or perhaps success is related to whether or not the student has showed **progress**. In a composition class, this would mean that the students are able to produce better, more effective writing upon leaving the course then they could on entering, even though they may not have raised their skills to some mythical and high external standard. A third possibility is that passing should be closely related to a student's educational **intentions**. In other words, is the individual prepared to deal with the next level of instruction? The logic of the situation is that it is not really fair (or even very kind) to set up expectations that a student cannot actually meet. But logic and fairness have their limits, too, and compassion and humane considerations have their part to play in the course-end assessment of ABE students. All of which leads to the conclusion that there are standards . . . and there are standards. Standards of common sense as well as of composition.

Perhaps a good case can be made for all end-of-course (summative) grading to be on a "credit/non-credit" system. If the students appear to have mastered the essentials of a course or a particular level of instruction (as determined by more than one measurement), they can be "passed" on to the next level; if they don't appear to have done this, they can be invited to try again (or can move into other areas of instruction better suited to their abilities). They should be able to do either without having the stigma of "failure" placed upon them.

Alternatively, if a letter grade is essential, instructors and departments might wish to adopt or modify a scheme such as that illustrated by Examples 1 and 2 (see below). Example 1 provides for evaluation of five elements of a writing course, each rated on a four-point scale. (The "publication" element might include any writing presented to real audiences.) The total score, ranging from 5 to 20, could then be translated to a letter grade, as indicated in Example 2.

In the final reckoning, moreover, though ABE instructors have a responsibility to help students gain confidence and self-respect they also have a responsibility to the institution and to society in general. Grades of some kind must be determined and reported. The argument here is that the grades that each ABE instructor submits should be arrived at on the basis of many factors — a student's needs, a student's effort, and a student's realistic intentions. The factor related to intentions may perhaps be the most significant. Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that ABE instructors will continue to work in a world where enlightened administrators understand the complexity of this problem, and where the needs of student writers may usually be set above the rigid demands of a system.

EXAMPLE 1: END-OF-COURSE WRITING EVALUATION

Journal	1	2	3	4
Writing Folio	1	2	3	4
Holistic Assessment of Specified Writing Task	1	2	3	4
Publication	1	2	3	4
Holistic Assessment of Student-selected Piece of Writing	1	2	3	4

(Range of Scores 5-20)

EXAMPLE 2: LETTER GRADE CONVERSIONS

Score	Letter Grade
15-20	A
13-14	B
9-12	C
7-8	D
5-6	E

10. EVALUATE YOUR WRITING PROGRAM*

There is ample evidence that students improve their writing skills when they use writing (or typing, or composing on a word-processor) to express their own ideas for real audiences, not merely to be marked and graded as on a test. The most effective writing programs provide students with opportunities to write in a variety of forms to achieve real purposes. Such a flexible program requires an environment somewhat like a "writers' workshop," in which students can get help with their writing as they need it.

For the writing instructor who wishes to function as the students' editor rather than as an examiner, the following questions (Example 1) can serve as indicators of how far the program is geared to teaching the process of writing. Only a paragon could answer yes to all these questions, because no-one would be able to do all of these things all of the time. Rather, the purpose of this "reminder list" is to enable instructors to compare their method to the "writing-as-a-process" approach which has generally been advocated in this resource book.

* Reproduced with permission from Dr. Sydney Butler, Language Education Department, University of British Columbia.

EXAMPLE 1: WRITING-AS-A-PROCESS
A REMINDER LIST

1. Do your students really write? _____
2. Do your students write every day? _____
3. Do your students write about matters that are important to them? _____
4. Do your students use their writing _____
   - to record their experiences and feelings? _____
   - to express their views about the world? _____
   - to express their responses to their reading? _____
   - to express their ideas about TV, movies, concerts, sports events, or other happenings? _____
   - to express curricular concepts in their own words? _____
   - to explore their ideas, feelings, and perceptions? _____
5. Do your students talk about their ideas before writing? _____
6. Do your students talk about their ideas between drafts? _____
7. Do you teach your students how to generate and collect ideas? _____
8. Do your students keep a file of all their drafts? _____
9. Do your students write in a variety of modes and forms?

personal writing	_____	reports	_____	essays	_____
private journals	_____	articles	_____	poems	_____
letters	_____	reviews	_____	stories	_____
estimates, memors, evaluations, advertisements, posters	_____			jokes	_____

10. In your evaluation of student writing is your first response always to its content? _____
11. Do you believe that a reader's honest response to a writer's ideas is a better evaluation than a grade? _____
12. Do you refrain from marking or grading the drafts of writing-in-progress? _____
13. Do your students come to you for a "writing conference" to get help with a specific problem in drafting or editing a piece of writing? _____

14. Do you help students to decide which of their writings are worth revising and editing? _____

15. Do you teach your students how to revise and edit a piece of work? _____

16. Do your students read each other's drafts and then compose a written response to help the writer in the development of the piece? _____

17. Do your students regard writing activity as something more than an exercise or a test? _____

18. Do your students write for other audiences besides instructors? _____

19. Do you help your students to publish or present their writing to other audiences?

20. Do you separate proofreading as a skill distinct from editing and revising? _____

21. Do you publish your students' writings? _____

22. Do you write in class with your students? _____

23. Do **you** demonstrate to a class how **you** revise a piece of your own writing? _____

24. Do you share **your** writing with your students? _____

25. Are your students able to get help from others in the final preparation of their writing? _____

26. Do your students believe that they are able to write? _____

27. Are your students scared of writing? _____

28. Do your students get any joy or satisfaction from their writing? _____

29. Do any of your students show you their own "outside" writing? _____

30. Do you know if your students are improving in their writing skills? How? _____

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL